



Glimpses  
from the North-East

*National Knowledge Commission*  
2009



# Glimpses from the North-East



सत्यमेव जयते

National Knowledge Commission

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# Preface

The north-eastern region of India is a rich tapestry of culture and nature. Breathtaking flora and fauna, heritage drawn from the ages and the presence of a large number of diverse groups makes this place a treasure grove. If culture represents the entire gamut of relationships which human beings share with themselves as well as with nature, the built environment, folk life and artistic activity, the north-east is a 'cultural and biodiversity hotspot', whose immense potential is beginning to be recognised. There is need for greater awareness and sensitisation here, especially among the young. In this respect, the National Knowledge Commission believes that the task of connecting with the north-east requires a multi-pronged approach, where socio-economic development must accompany multi-cultural understanding.

This book, 'Glimpses from the North-East', seeks to highlight and celebrate some of the unique cultural and environmental aspects of the north-east. Here, a few well-known writers based in the region delve into some cultural traditions and institutions through the medium of folk narratives and stories. The language of folklore is at once universal and particular. We believe that the canvas of commonness and togetherness in the midst of variations and distances provides the backdrop for an appreciation of the North-East. Articulation through the folk idiom helps in understanding community perceptions, institutions and responses. This understanding, in turn, facilitates bridges of dialogue.

A number of schemes have already been undertaken for the socio-economic development of the north-east (see for example, Annexure I of this book for relevant excerpts from the 11<sup>th</sup> Five Year Plan). A few cultural initiatives are also underway, under the aegis of the Department of the North-East Region (DONER) and the Ministry of Culture. Nevertheless, a broader, more systematic and long-term plan to enrich the cultural and environmental heritage of the north-east is necessary.

A plan on 'Knowledge from the North-East' could focus on themes such as Traditional Health Systems, Folk Music, Folk Art, Dance Forms, Oral Literature and Biodiversity. There is need for detailed analysis on the enormous potential for economic opportunity that such themes could generate for the people of the north-east. Further, creating a 'Green is Clean' conclave, focusing on the region's

unique biodiversity, could involve scientific and community-based initiatives of knowledge-sharing for forest conservation, water management, land use and eco-sustaining agricultural practices. An 'Art, Culture and Literature' conclave could provide a platform for regional artists, folk performers, film makers, writers and poets in a manner that could make the north-east a cultural hub. Electronic initiatives, with cutting-edge equipment and facilities, including a North-East Portal, are also necessary to document changing socio-cultural landscapes. This will provide invaluable data to construct historiographies and ethnographies of various communities through lifestyles, occupations, cuisines, practices, costumes and other elements of heritage.

A lot more needs to be done. This book is a step in such a direction. It is hoped that 'Glimpses of the North-East' will provide insights and encourage a newer generation of young writers and scholars to carry out more detailed work on the various interesting and significant aspects pertaining to this important region of India.



# Oral Narratives and Myth

*Mamang Dai*

On the eve of the new millennium, newspapers carried reports of a small and breathtakingly beautiful valley hidden in the hills. The reports said that the valley of Dong, in Lohit district of Arunachal Pradesh, and not Katchal of Andaman and Nicobar Islands, was the place that would receive the first rays of the millennium sun in mainland India. This fact, further confirmed by scientists and the Survey of India, promoted a rush of visitors to the remote spot in the mountains of Arunachal Pradesh which was dubbed the *sunrise village*.

Part of the Eastern Himalayan range, Arunachal Pradesh is the largest state of India's North-East Region (NER), the broad term given to the group of 7 states, dubbed as the *seven sisters*. The state was earlier known as NEFA - the North East Frontier Agency until 1972, when it became a union territory with the brand new name of *Arunachal Pradesh*, Land of the Dawn Lit Mountains. Arunachal Pradesh became a full fledged state in 1987. It is 83,743 sq km. in area stretching eastwards from Bhutan in the west to the Patkoi Hills that forms India's boundary with Myanmar. To the north and

north-east, the state marks the last frontier of the country with a 1,080 km long international boundary with China along the crest of the eastern Himalaya.

It is an area of great scenic beauty with snow peaks falling gradually southwards into pristine forests and valleys criss-crossed by turbulent rivers and streams. These water routes feed the mighty Brahmaputra River in the plains of Assam, providing a unique environmental world which gives the state the honour of being one of the greenest parts of the country. The Himalayan region captures some of the world's heaviest rainfall and the result is an expanse of lush tropical forest where life breeds in myriad forms. It is estimated that Arunachal Pradesh harbours a minimum of 5,500 flowering species. Arunachal Pradesh is also known for naturally occurring orchids with over 525 species. An orchid centre set up in Tipi in West Kameng district is the largest orchidarium in Asia. The state is also one of the few places in the world that can boast the four big felines – the tiger, leopard, clouded leopard and snow leopard within one area in the Namdapha biosphere reserve of Changlang district.

*Orchids*



Snow Peaks



This, in summary, is a brief introduction to Arunachal Pradesh. A closer examination will reveal that the area offers a complex cultural mosaic characterised by unique features that the state, due to geographical and historical reasons, has succeeded in keeping as one of the last bastions of the tribal world. The tribes of Arunachal Pradesh have always lived off the forest without any threat to the ecosystem. The tenets of traditional practice are deep rooted in environment ethics, supporting a close and harmonious relationship with nature. Arunachal tribes have a tremendous knowledge of the use of plants for native medicine and the instructions handed down from generation to generation are contained in stories and myths that is a unique feature of the different communities living here.

The state is divided into 16 administrative districts and is home to 26 tribal groups, further sub-divided into clans and sub-groups each with its distinctive traditions and customs. Apart from the Buddhist tribes of the northern boundaries, the tribes of what is termed the central belt of Arunachal Pradesh, viz: the *Adi*, *Galo*, *Nyishi*, *Apa-Tani*, *Tagin* and *Mishmi* comprise the Tani group of tribes that claim ancestry from a common legendary forefather called *Abo Tani*, the first man on earth. This in turn forms the tenets of indigenous faith called the way of *Donyi-Polo*, literally translated as *Donyi-sun*, *Polo-moon*, that recognises the sun and moon as the cosmic symbolic power through which the supreme spiritual being, the world-spirit, is made manifest.

According to this belief, in the beginning there was only *Keyum* or nothingness. There was neither darkness nor light, nor was there any colour or movement. *Keyum* is the remote past beyond the reach of our senses. It is the place of ancient things from where no answer is received. Out of this great stillness, the first flicker of thought began to shine like a light in the soul of man. This shimmering trail took shape and expanded to what is known as the pathway. Out of this nebulous area, a spark was born that was the light of imagination. It grew

into a shining stream that was the consciousness of man, and from this stage all the stories of the world, its creation, and all its creatures came into being.<sup>1</sup>

The myth as primitive history expressed in poetic form is notable among the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh. This is an entirely non-script collection, sung or chanted as narrative ballads and epics about the origin of the world, the sky, the heavenly bodies and the mother earth, are recounted by professional rhapsodists on a variety of occasions, especially during the time of the great festivals. Almost all of tribal belief is tied up with agricultural practice, but though the festivals are agricultural rites marking the passage of the seasons, the religious aspect is always present along with the recollection of a serene and happy co-existence with the natural world that helped man to survive in a harsh environment all these years with very little contact with the outside world.

An example of this is revealed in one of the first stories that I heard as a child about a far away land of fish and stars (*Engo Takar*) and the lost civilisation of the *Kojum Koj*. It is said that at the dawn of human existence, there sprang up on the surface

of the earth an ancient human society known as *Kojum Koj*.<sup>2</sup> *Kojum Koj* established villages and were a self sufficient, contented and happy people. The *Kojum Koj* civilisation was destroyed by a devastating flood let loose by the ruler of the waters, *Biri Bote*, whose son was accidentally trapped and killed by the people of *Kojum Koj* during a festival. At this time, a guest appeared amongst the society of *Kojum Koj*. It was the bat, *Koru Ponsung Babu*. The guest inquired about the meat and the people of *Kojum Koj* replied that a fish had been caught in their traps and that they had killed it for the festival. After hearing this, the bat left for the domain of water (*Silli-Sidong*). Arriving in the deepest depths, the bat noticed the wife of the ruler of the watery regime weeping in great sorrow. The queen was asking who had kidnapped her beloved son, *Biri Angur Potung*. The bat broke the news to her that her son had been killed and consumed in a festival by the *Kojum Koj*.

The news of the killing of *Biri Angur* sparked off a great war. Message of the tragedy reached every nook and corner of the watery regime and its ruler commanded his war generals to launch a destructive and terrifying attack on the people of



<sup>1</sup> Adi belief in '*Donyi-Polo*,' the way of the sun and moon.

<sup>2</sup> The legend of *Nyangi Myete* as recorded by Oshong Ering, scholar and doyen of Adi Literature.

*Kojum Koja*. With sharp dazzling blades and rattling swords, the combined armies unleashed their fury wave after wave on the land of *Kojum Koja*. The *Kojum Koja* defended themselves valiantly but the armies of the great king besieged them from all sides. In the form of rain, storm, flood and erosion, the armies of the waters destroyed the land of the *Kojum Koja* and buried their civilisation.

After this great battle, the world was dark and silent. Everything was covered in water and it seemed all life had ended, until, out of this wreckage a lady emerged like a lonely reed rising taller and steadier inch by inch, like a ray of hope. This was the popular beauty known as *Nyangi Myete*, celestial bride of the *Kojum* family who drifted down to humanity to tell the tale of destruction, and to generate new hope for another civilisation on earth. Dressing herself in the fashion of a glamorous bride wearing a white silken skirt with a green border, and possessing all the qualities of civilised life, the celestial beauty floated down to bring grace and warmth to the society of humans. Indeed, her arrival generated a new current of life and enthusiasm among the people she visited.

Tradition presents her as the most charming and beautiful bride of the *Kojum Koja*. She is the centre of attraction and the

warmth of the society revolves around her. It is *Nyangi Myete* who pleases guests and friends by pouring out cups of rice wine while her charismatic and entertaining manner maintains the honour and humour of the society. It is her generosity that makes people dance and sing and enjoy life. The land and people of *Kojum Koja* may be buried in the deluge but because of this celestial lady the memory of that civilised society remains immortal. From the obscure world of myth, this celestial lady came down to live on this earth. Her beauty is present in the form of natural things. The green vegetation on the surface of the earth is the green-bordered skirt that she wears. Her silken white robe is transformed into clouds. The changes of the seasons are her appearance at different social occasions. The water and rain are her sweat and tears. Her melodious songs and music are transformed into the sweet voices of birds and humming insects. The ever changing and beautiful natural world represents the charming beauty of the *Kojum Koja*. Thus, mythological belief is projected into present reality through natural surroundings and the interpretation of human imagination.

The Land of Fish and Stars (*engo takar*) is akin to the *Dreamtime* that is so crucial in Australian aboriginal literature. All the things that we perceive-the sun,

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moon, hills and rivers were all born out of that mythical place that exists as the *dreamtime*, the place of ancient things from which the stories of the world, the stories of gods and goddesses and the birth of man and life on earth unfolded since thought and speech began. There are similarities across the world in the first stories of wandering tribes and vanished empires. The ancient Mayan and Aztec civilisations worshipped the sky god and sacrificed to the mighty sun, and stretching from China throughout the Far East and across to the frozen frontiers of Alaska and to the Americas, myths and legends are the basis of traditions and beliefs of communities across the world. So it is with the Homeric legends, the gods of Northern Europe, Hindu mythology, and myths of ancient Egypt and Rome.

In the fast-paced global world of today, one may well ask what the worth of these old stories and legends is. The question of direction and destiny has become one of great complexity and soul searching. And the question is ‘Where do we begin? What is the most important thing to start with?’ Perhaps in this, myth and memory have their role too. How do we identify ourselves as members of a community belonging to a particular place, with a particular history? Some of the signs for this lie with our stories. We are here today as

members of a community with a particular set of beliefs, by an act of faith, because we believed in the ‘*word*’ as composed in our myths and legends. It is here that we may find that peculiar, indefinable something by which we recognise each other, and make others see us as a group, a society, a people of a particular community.

Today I might say that these stories of gods and demons have no basis in logic, but the storyteller will tell me that they were born out of reason, out of the minds of men. The stories did not come out of nowhere like a bolt of lightning. Life generated it in us, and the significance of songs and stories is that they demonstrate the complex nature of human faith founded on memory and the magic of words in the oral tradition.

With time, the collection of myths developed into parables and a code of conduct that became the basis for daily customary practice as observed by the tribes. Everyone knows the stories, in one form or another, and it is this knowledge that links the individual to a group, a certain region and community, but most often the stories are inseparable from the routine of daily life that they are not even perceived as stories anymore. This is why if I asked someone to tell me a story they would say there was nothing to tell. There

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are no reference books, few recorded volumes in print, and to find out anything you need patience and persistence. For instance, if I approach someone, pointed out as a great story teller, he will inevitably shrug and say, 'What! What kind of story? How can anyone pull a story out of air, eh?' And if I turn to the young girls weaving cloth and asked them who taught us to weave, I know they will burst into laughter and say, 'Who knows about these things. It was here before we were born!'

But if I persist, asking what is this colour, what did we use before this, what is that implement called, I might unearth interesting information about the "cloth of butterflies", how the wife of a god whispered the secret of weaving to a woman in a dream and how the first cotton plant grew out of the white feather of a kite. Who invented these stories? Who said this should be done? Who gave us these instructions and told men and women to erect a guardian gate at the entrance to every village? Who told us that the leaves and branches of certain trees are auspicious? One gateway leads to another and a story begins to unfold a storehouse of meanings.

Scholars tell us that in the history of literature, the verse form is older than prose. The early history of many countries

proves this as recounted in epics, ballads and heroic poems. Our own traditional literature offers similar proof. People here still believe that different clans possess different roots that return to haunt every generation. These roots reveal themselves as the powers of healing, prediction, war and chase, or the root of words, meaning oratory. It is what holds our ceremonies, rites and rituals together. In this context, the role of memory becomes crucial and remembrance of the word became the art of the storyteller, the orator, the medicine man, the priest.

This seems to tally with what I now read that: 'we are the versicles or words or letters of a magic book, and that incessant book is the only thing in the world: more exactly, it is the world.' (JL Borges)

Arunachal Pradesh is a place full of stories. The stories explain observed behaviour and natural phenomena and imbue them with sense and order. They also remind the community that it is important to keep our obligations, the reasons for which are contained in the stories. These obligations apply to every aspect of daily life from social behaviour, ceremonies, worship and environment to the preparation of food with its associated taboos. In Arunachal mythology, rice is of divine

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origin. It is a gift of the gods that came to a race of sky dwellers in the land of fish and stars. The story goes that during a great hunt, the faithful dog of a legendary hunter lost his way and strayed into the kingdom of the great mother earth, the goddess of grain. The dog told her how he had lost his way. The goddess heard him out and gave him a few seeds of rice, which the faithful dog carried back to the land of the sky dwellers in the crease of his ear. This is one of the many stories of how grain came to man.

The energy of the village is concentrated on the cultivation of rice and every fertile plot of land is given over to growing this crop. Based on the rich store of rice myths, its relevance is associated with all the important rites of life, birth and death, ranging from festivals and community feasts to marriages and ritual offerings. Special rice preparations are required for many occasions. Among the Khamptis and Singphos of Lohit district, a preparation of red rice wrapped in leaf packets is an essential item of offering in weddings. Rice is also the chief ingredient for the local rice beer that is believed to be a gift from the gods. Like any other good wine, making rice beer is an art. A house is lucky if its women

make good rice beer for it is the precious ingredient of social life that frees the mind, loosens the tongue and makes people happy. Before rice beer was invented, life was very dull. Men sat about feeling bored; they had nothing to talk about; they did not hold councils or tell stories or laugh.”<sup>3</sup>

In parts of Dibang valley, a pale gold local wine is made by the *Idu Mishmi* from extract of honeycombs. The region is noted for its tradition of honey gathering. This event is associated with the performance of prescribed rituals after which men scale the craggy peaks and caves lined with enormous beehives using bamboo ladders, rope and twine. It is a dangerous feat and only the strong and fearless are chosen. The bees are smoked out with the burning of leaves and long bamboo poles are used to dislodge the hives. The honeycomb is boiled and yeast is added to make a potent brew that is called *yu ambey*. Sometimes, at the entry of a house a visitor might be surprised to see a dangling honeycomb that is referred to as the *devils's puzzle*. An *Idu* home generally sports this item as a protection against evil spirits. When night falls and spirits are wandering the earth, the honeycomb acts as a spell that diverts their

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<sup>3</sup> An old Hill Miri belief – recorded in *Myths of the North-East Frontier* by Verrier Elwin



*Children dressed for performance*

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attention. The spirits begin to examine and count the cells of the empty comb. This exercise takes up all their time and soon their power is broken as the night passes and they flee back into their world, and no harm befalls the family.

These days we talk about identity, culture, heritage, and what it means. There are many movements to forge regional identities. Everyday we are reminded to uphold our culture. It is a line inserted in every speech, as if culture is the magic word that will arouse attention and endear the speaker to his audience. What then, is myth, identity, meaning and culture?

One bright sunny day, a host of school children drew pictures, worked on paper masks and there, in the shade of the normally empty and silent state museum, practiced a war dance loud with laughter, battle cries and ferocious footwork. Part of the Tribal Transitions Project,<sup>4</sup> the Museum Max workshop was all set to reorient methods of teaching and linking museums with education. In the process, drawings blossomed on paper, flutes and trumpets were coloured orange and blue, pyramids of mountains rose

towards a flock of birds circling a red sun, while a picture of the famous log drum of the Nocte and Wancho of Tirap district showed a smiling face and four legs. In fact, this was the first time I heard the log drum being freely sounded as a group of students tap-tapped on the burnished wood bringing to life the sounds of a bygone era.

In the present time when the region is confronted with rapid changes, these ancient tales need not be perceived solely as something of the past, as 'dead' literature, that in the process of documentation all the old words are frozen in print and will have reached a dead end. With every new understanding a story will unfold endless doorways. As in the case of the activities at the museum it is apparent that tribal traditions need not be devoted to, or perceived solely as something of the 'past,' but instead be the catalysts for the creative instincts of a people that identify their culture. In this way this literature of oral narratives also gives us our sense of identity. In short, like the flute, the gong and the log drum, and the storyteller's art, culture and identity will mean nothing unless it can be shared.

<sup>4</sup> The Tribal Transitions Project was launched in the state in 2002, and is based at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), London, the British Museum (London), in partnership with the Centre for Cultural Research and Documentation, (CCRD, Itanagar), Rajiv Gandhi University (Arunachal), and the Government of Arunachal Pradesh.



# A Walk through the Sacred Forests of Meghalaya

*Desmond Kharmawphlang*

The sacred forests of the Khasi and Jaintia hills of Meghalaya are located in public forests set aside for religious purposes under the traditional land use system. These sacred forests are divided into three categories, depending on the places where they are located. In places controlled by the *Lyngdoh* or priest, the sacred forests are called *Law Lyngdoh*. In places that have a heavy concentration of people who adhere to the Khasi indigenous faith, these forests are called *Lawniam*, and in places where villages are under the control of the village headman, the forests are called *Law Kyntang* (which is the literal meaning of sacred forest). The sacred forests are intrinsically related to the social, religious and cultural life of the Khasi people. Needless to say, these forests are home to a number of flora and fauna, which are endangered and as such are rich in bio-diversity.

About a hundred and forty eight years ago, Sir J.D. Hooker, the well-known and widely respected botanist visited the Mawphlang sacred forest. Impressed with the bio-diversity of its environs, he strongly urged its protection

and conservation. Later, another botanist and a colonial Forest Service officer, Dr. N.L. Bor visited the place and likewise, he echoed Hooker's sentiments. These and other observations were considered by the local people and a situation was created leading to a movement of sorts within the Hima or the traditional state of Mawphlang which assumed a very important dimension. Opinion was brought to bear on the elected heads of the 12 ruling clans and a *riti synshar* or an instrument of law was introduced by the Hima Mawphlang through the office of the *Lyngdoh* or priest on 30<sup>th</sup> April, 1970. Through this proclamation, the forests of Mawphlang were formally categorised according to the requirements of the time and their functions and uses stated in writing. These forests are *Ka Khlaw Raji Ka Khlaw Adong, Khlaw Lyngdoh, Khlaw Lyngdoh Khun, Khlaw Lait-Tyrkhang, Khlaw Ri-Kynti or Ri Sumar and Khlaw Ri-Kur*.

Some important scientific study has been conducted in some of these forests and environmental scientists have opined that these

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forests provide the best habitat for the reproduction of species and could help in better use of fallow land. They could also serve as very important control sites for ecological study.

The restrictions that are associated with the sacred forests are simple and reasonable – everybody may go there and find whatever muse or pleasure he or she may be looking for inside. Families or friends may go there and have a picnic, but no one is allowed to take anything – be it a leaf stuck in shoes or hair-out of the grove’s boundary. And of course, felling of timber in these areas is absolutely prohibited.

The sacred groves at Mawphlang, a heaven-sent treasure-house for environmentalists and botanists, is one of seven different kinds of grove to be found in the chiefdom of Mawphlang. Occupying a saucer-shaped depression, with hills falling away all round, this ancient forest is surrounded by numerous rough-hewn monoliths, erected in memory of the departed Khasi elders. As one approaches, one will see brightly clad Khasi women and girls, fetching water for domestic use, passing to and from the stream that meanders into the forest, with the usual conical basket on their backs, supported by a strap around the forehead.

As soon as you enter the grove, you feel its cool air and

a sense of refreshment that defies definition. You are in the humbling presence of Nature. Nothing may be removed from here: the ground is as soft as a carpet with the leaves and vegetation that has piled up, layer on layer, untouched through the ages. The entwining trees and orchids are so thick overhead that the sun’s rays barely penetrate the ferns, mosses, lichens and fungi on the forest floor.

The grove stands undisturbed today in its natural form not because of any legal sanction but because it is believed by the people that the sylvan deities would be offended were anything to be taken away, a belief reinforced by generations of oral tradition and by reference to the concept of the *Basa*, a village deity and guardian spirit of the grove. Mawphlang, like any other sacred grove, also has its share of mischievous spirits who like to play pranks to scare and confuse people. The name of the spirit haunting the Mawphlang sacred forest is *Suid Tynjang* and that of the sacred forests located in the Northern parts of Khasi Hills, the Ri-Bhoi district, is the *Thabalong*.

Like most things, sacred forests also have stories and stories, as we know, are about time and space. Stories have everywhere and always found eager listeners. Whether the narrative

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is a report of a recent happening, an antiquated legend or a cleverly contrived fiction, men and women have hung upon words churned by storytellers and satisfy their yearnings for amusement, for validating a belief, for information, for religious edification or simply for the release from the overwhelming monotony of their lives. The art of storytelling is far older than history and till today, it is one of the most filling pastimes. Curiosity about the past and especially about striking phenomena has brought listeners to tales and legends become legends because they grow with the telling. Religion has played a significant role in the encouragement of the narrative art and entire cosmologies and philosophical discourses have been derived from these narratives. The parameters of these tales which in turn create discourses and belief systems are drawn by the limitations of human life and the similarity of its basic situations. Stories, while existing in time and space, are influenced by the nature of the land, by the linguistic and social constitution of its people, by the shadowing historical circumstances and changes.

According to the Khasi indigenous faith, these patches of wilderness which are the *law kyntang* are held sacred due to the presence of *U Ryngkew U Basa* – believed to be the earthly

embodiment of the primeval *Ryngkew* and husband of *Lisan*, the primeval universal mother. Conceived as a male, he is also regarded as the first light and father to rock and soil. The *Ryngkew and Basa* are believed to manifest their being and presence, at times, through human and animal agencies. These spirits were sent by God to dwell on earth. Why did this happen? There is a story behind it!

When the earth was young, it was believed that there grew a gigantic tree with branches spreading in all directions and as the tree grew, swathes of shadows were cast. Gradually, more and more places became overcast and as the tree continued growing with rapidity, the branches also started reaching across larger and larger areas. Very soon, the sun was almost eclipsed and creatures, both humans and animals, were seized with fear. Finally, total darkness covered the earth and none dared venture out in search of food or to finish any chores. It was finally decided in a council that the tree had to be felled and collectively, humans in great numbers went to the mountain range of Diengiei to the west of present day Shillong and started to work at bringing the tree down with their axes and machetes. However, the tree trunk was too huge and the people found that they could not finish the work in one day. They left the place

**Stories, while existing in time and space, are influenced by the nature of the land, by the linguistic and social constitution of its people, by the shadowing historical circumstances and changes.**

and returned home to rest and sleep.

When they returned the next day, the cut marks and notches made on the trunk of the gigantic tree had all disappeared and the Diengiei stood as new as ever. The people, determined to bring the tree down, began anew to hack at the trunk once again and as the day before, had to give up without success swearing to finish the work the following day. The next day when they came to the place they discovered to their dismay that the tree was whole again. Nearby, a small migratory bird called the *Phreit* was perched on a bush and it taunted the people there telling them that it would be impossible to fell the tree unless they heeded it because it knew the secret of how the tree regained its lost sinews. After obtaining permission for itself and its ilk to feast from ripened paddy fields for generations to come, the *Phreit* disclosed that when the people go home after their labours, a tiger used to come and lick the wounded portions of the tree trunk and thus, the Diengiei would heal itself.

The bird then advised the people to tie their axes and machetes to the tree trunk all around so that when the tiger comes to lick the wounds and notches it would cut its tongue and abandon its mission. As predicted, the tiger,

after hurting itself, ran away in the darkness of night and the following day, the tree fell. God was offended by the actions of the humans as the tree was supposed to symbolise a close relationship between God and man and this destructive action severed all connections between creator and creature. The felling of the Diengiei tree ushered in long periods of calamity and deprivation. There was discord between animals and humans and peace died. The earth including all its inhabitants beseeched God's forgiveness and as signs of atonement, forswore the use of axes and machetes on trees and plants unless necessary. God also looked on kindly at this gesture and resolved to send the *Ryngkew* and the *Basa*, his representatives to live in the *law kyntang* or sacred forests and accept the annual deification through ritualistic offerings and ceremonies.

This narrative constitutes a fundamental tenet of the Khasi religious philosophy and is often told and retold in ceremonial situations lasting several hours. In conjunction, offerings in memory of clan progenitors and founders are also performed in the sacred forests. Therefore, it is very common to see symbolic representations of the *Ryngkew* in the form of a rock or stone which may be naturally formed or constructed and to also see imposing megalithic structures

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which are actually cromlechs, cairns sarcophagi and other forms of commemorative stone structures. An event to give offerings to the *Ryngkew* could also double up as one in which the ancestors are propitiated. In fact, almost all clan and community ceremonies of consequence are performed within the confines of the sacred forests. The *Mawphlang* sacred forest, one of the most well-known, was established by *ka Khmah*, the founder of the *Lyngdoh Mawphlang* clan. Till today, one can see the imposing commemorative stones erected in her memory. In addition, there can be seen other stones which have sacerdotal significance till today.

### **Regeneration of the sacred forest law kyntang thaiang**

Another sacred forest which has striking accounts of how it originated, flourished and was destroyed is the *law kyntang thaiang*. Thaiang is the name given to the community of seven villages in a remote part of North Khasi Hills in the State of Meghalaya in North East India. These villages of Mawlaho, Umtyrkhang, Pamlatar, Pamphlang, Iam Khon, Mawshunam and Mawtari once shared a common traditional administrative set up, religion (Khasi Indigenous faith) and most importantly, a huge sacred forest. For centuries, adherence to indigenous faith and respect

for the forest deities ensured the total preservation of the forest with its incredible wealth of flora and fauna.

During the early 1990s, my work as a folklorist took me to Thaiang and after a long time of work in this area, collecting songs and stories, I was accepted by the villagers. One of the most fascinating stories I heard was about the sacred forest, the traditions associated with it, its subsequent destruction and the fallout in its wake. The site where the old sacred forest used to be located is exactly in the centre of the seven constituent villages of Thaiang and one can easily visualise that it functioned as the heart and something that the villages drew spiritual sustenance from. It served as a meeting place for village councils and spring dances. As is the case in most sacred forests found in Khasi and Jaintia Hills, the sacred forest of Thaiang was protected by a spiritual tutelary deity called *U Ryngkew U Basa* who, whenever he makes himself visible, takes the form of a tiger. Till today, in quite a few of these forests, religious ceremonies in the form of rituals and spring dances are regularly performed in honour of the *Ryngkew* or the tiger spirit who is perceived as the master of wilderness.

During my countless visits to Thaiang, I could see that the area was shorn of any trees and as far

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as the eye could see, there were only naked hills extending to the skies. Inferior quality bamboo, elephant grass, lantana and broomstick plants added to the stark, dry, unkempt sight of the slopes where shifting cultivation was practiced. There was no trace of rain. Spring seemed to have failed to breathe a new lease of life. The rotting stumps of once magnificent trees dotting the hills told their own story of destruction. A series of droughts destroyed the crops, year after year, compelling the villagers to take up the monoculture plantation of broomsticks. The villagers realised their loss as they struggled to eke out a living in the unforgiving hills. "It is the curse of the *Ryngkew*. Ever since the forests were destroyed, we have had nothing but trouble, sickness and poverty", said the syiem (chief) of Raid Thaiang, Jerly Syiem, during one of his conversations with me.

On my next visit, I was approached by the chief and his elders and they told me that they had a series of meetings in the village and they had come to convey their desire to reforest the site where the splendid sacred forest of Thaiang used to be. This would be done as a symbolic act of atonement, to bring back good fortune to Thaiang and to set an example for other villages that had lost their sacred forests. This was August 1995.

One of the problems faced by the present *Lyngdoh* or priest was that he was no longer able to initiate the rituals necessary for the consecration of the forest and a process of re-learning had to be undertaken by him and other religious functionaries. This process took two years. The actual launching of this project to regenerate the decimated forest took place on 24<sup>th</sup> April, 1997 with the performance of the traditional spring dance, a dance which had been abandoned ever since the destruction of the forest some 28 years ago. Three ceremonial stones were erected at the *Khyrdop* or the gateway of the forest and the rituals performed once again.

The actual re-plantation work was done on 25<sup>th</sup> and 26<sup>th</sup> June, 1997 and on these days, about 3500 saplings which were brought by truck from a forest department nursery were planted. All the able-bodied



people of Thaiang participated in this community work. I was involved in this entire Thaiang sacred forest regeneration programme but I was interested in this more as a poet and a folklorist who sees the sacred forest as the central symbol and focal point of mythological and poetic imagination.

The belief in sacred forests as religious and cultural space is intrinsic to Khasi thought and philosophy. It

perhaps provides material for serious thinking about the civilisational evolution of bio-diversity, including man and his institutions. It is a validation of the importance of engaging local discourse in diverse global challenges and developmental agendas. The conflation of folklore, traditional knowledge, and bio-diversity reveals the interdependencies of all these forces which may ensure the survival of this, our only planet.

# *Ariju*: The Traditional Seat of Learning in Ao Society

*Monalisa Changkija*

To the casual outside observer, Naga society, like other tribal societies, must appear very simple. However, tribal societies are very complex and they differ vastly in nature from non-tribal societies.

Tribal societies are also very well structured and organised and each individual has very clear cut roles and responsibilities, which are considered essential for the smooth running of village/community life. In fact, the strength of a tribal society lies in their well-defined institutions and organisations, which exercise great discipline

over individuals and influence the quality of life in any village.

Naga society is made up of over 40 tribes spread over the states of Nagaland, Manipur, Assam, Arunachal Pradesh and our neighbouring country Myanmar. We will discuss a very fundamental institution of the Nagas, which is called the *Morung*. For our purpose, we will focus on the Ao tribe's institution of the *Morung*, which is called *Ariju*. In any Ao village, the *Ariju* plays the central role in every aspect of an individual's life. It is the fundamental basis of Naga cultural heritage.

A unique institution, the *Ariju* is akin to the modern day school, college and university for this is where from a very early age, Ao boys live together and are taught and trained to shoulder the responsibilities of adulthood. *Ariju* basically means the bachelors' dormitory or house. It is better understood in terms of a modern university or military headquarters because of its functions, nature of training and exchange and propagation of ideas. *Ariju* is generally a boys' school, college and university all rolled into one, as also the





centre and agent of socialisation and in ancient traditional Ao society, it is considered to be the perfect seat of learning. The *Ariju* is necessarily the pivotal place and/or space where ideas are exchanged.

The *Ariju* is also a place in which war strategy is planned and discussed. The *Ariju* can be likened to a fortress. Etymologically, *Ar* means enemy and *ju* means to guard or watch or keep vigil, denoting that it is a headquarters for warfare training and military matters.

The *Ariju* is one of the oldest and strongest means of social control and serves as an agent of community protection since this institution trains and disciplines the youth. This institution also serves society's need for social security and promotes culture. It also serves as a training centre for master craftsmanship in handloom, handicraft, pottery, masonry etc., and all other agricultural and trade activities. JP Mills had described *Ariju* as a 'Public School' (as also a boys' club) and indeed in modern terms that is exactly what it is and because from *Ariju*, the process of socialisation for an Ao man begins.

### **Ao Migration and Settlement**

To understand the concept of *Ariju* more clearly, we must understand the structural and

organisational systems and institutions of an Ao village.

Like all Naga tribes, the Aos too have migrated from China and South East Asia and settled down in their present territory, which is the Mokokchung district of Nagaland, the 16<sup>th</sup> State of the Indian Union. The route of the Aos' migration is said to be along the banks of the Yunnan River through present Myanmar during the period from the end of BC and beginning of AD. However, the Aos' migration did not take place at one go or through the same route.

After the long migration from the East, various groups of Aos set up villages in different parts of the six mountainous ranges of Mokokchung district. However, life was insecure for the new settlers, as they had to face the vagaries of an unknown environment replete with wild animals, as also raids from other Ao groups and other tribes, who attacked them for various reasons. According to oral traditions, the *Ariju* is as old as the village itself because it was constructed simultaneously with the establishment of the village. The exact time of a village's establishment may be shrouded in mystery but the circumstances and purpose of building the *Ariju* was clear. Legend has it that when all the male members of the village were away at work in the paddy fields,

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unknown enemies entered the village and took away domestic animals and other valuables. Like all traditional Naga villages, Ao villages too are inevitably set up on hilltops for protection from enemies, and paddy fields are always on the plain areas of valleys below the villages. Raids and attacks from enemies made villagers insecure hence they met to discuss the village's protection from such enemy incursions. They decided to build a platform in an ideal place from where the arrival of enemies could be easily seen. This platform was called *Arrjobang*, which later on evolved into the *Ariju*. In the initial stages, the platform was constructed without a roof. Only later, roofs and walls were added to protect the sentinels from rain and sun. In the course of time, it became the most decorated house in the village, much like the village Chief's or a rich man's house.

to guard the village throughout the day while everyone is busy at the paddy fields, as also to alert the villagers during emergencies such as fire, sickness, death, accident etc. They also deliver official letters and messages to other villages. The *Tsütemonger*, however, does not remain confined to the *Arrjobang* alone, he also patrols the entire length and breadth of the village throughout the day and night to ensure all is well.

When the population of villages was small in the olden days, one *Arrjobang* was built in the centre of the village and was accessible to everyone. However, with the increase in population, each clan in the village built its own *Arrjobangs* or *Arijus*. While there is no fixed rule as to how many *Arijus* can be built in a village, normally in bigger villages there are two *Arijus* and only one in smaller villages.

A couple of warriors were deputed to keep vigil night and day to guard the village and soon enough it became the central meeting point of all the villagers. The *Arrjobang* created a sense of security amongst the villagers, which later evolved into a living institution.

Ao villages, comprising several clans, are normally divided into two distinct khels – upper khel and lower khel – and each khel normally has an *Ariju* each but then again the population and the demand of the village dictates the number of *Arijus*.

The system and practice of guarding the village exist till today and the guard or sentinel is called *Tsütemonger*. The duty of the *Tsütemonger* (the guard) is

The construction of the *Ariju* is based on very clear-cut customs and religious beliefs, hence it is a tedious task and each step has to be followed precisely so as not to invite bad luck. The details of the

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construction of an *Ariju* indicate how crucial this structure is, as every member, every clan and every age group in the village has well-delineated roles to play and responsibilities to shoulder throughout the period of the construction. The construction also underscores how central the *Ariju* is, not only to the village as a collective but also to each villager, as an individual. Indubitably, the *Ariju* at once reflects the interdependence of the collective and the individual.

### The Age Group System

The interdependence of the collective and the individual is also reflected in the composition of the *Ariju*. The entire life of the *Ariju* is solely based on the network of the age group system called the *züngaren*. *Zünga* means age group and *ren* means 'in lines'. Without the *züngaren*, the organisation, functions and the working system of the *Ariju* would be impossible. *Zünga* or age group plays an important role in the social life of the Aos. Those born within three years form a *zünga*. Each *zünga* (age group) has to remain in the status for three years before they are upgraded to a higher status. All males are members of the *Ariju* from 12 years onwards. The oldest *zünga* retires every three years at about 25 years of age. A boy's tenure at the *Ariju* is about 10 to 15 years after which he would automatically become

a village councillor in the village administration called the *Putu Menden*.

However, a bachelor above the age of 30, even after his tenure expires, may continue to live at the *Ariju* but he is exempted from all compulsory duties and contributions.

If a man marries before or at 25 years of age, he ceases to sleep in the *Ariju* but is bound to perform all compulsory duties and make the compulsory contributions till his tenure expires along with the rest of his *zünga*.

As stated above, the entry point into the *Ariju* is 12 years of age and the exit point is 25 years of age. Membership into the *Ariju* also compulsorily entails that from the time a *zünga's* tenure begins, the boys live and sleep in the *Ariju* and not in their parents' residence. The members of the *Ariju* have not only their assigned duties, chores, tasks, roles, responsibilities and contributions but must also accept their share of punishment when there is any dereliction of duty and when found delinquent. Therefore, the overall upbringing and education of a boy is a collective responsibility and not that of the parents' alone. Is this what the African adage: "It takes the whole village to bring up a child" means?

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**The foundation of the *Ariju* is the distinct classification of each age group. Each group has a very well-defined status and they play their roles and shoulder their responsibilities accordingly. Basically, each age group maintains a two-tier system (upper and lower grades) within the same cadre. The nature, the structure and the functions of *Arijus* in all Ao villages are same.**

By and large, *Arijus* consists of six *züngas* (age groups). They are:

- Süngpur
- Tenapang
- Zütsung/Sangremzen
- Salang
- Senyim
- Jozen or Ajozen.

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Starting from manual and menial chores, like carrying water, chopping fire wood, sharpening daos and other implements of war and agriculture, running errands for the seniors etc., the age groups are promoted to agricultural and horticultural tasks, as also disciplining the younger group in all matters including war tactics. But this group is still considered too young to participate in head-hunting. The next age group continues the normal tasks assigned to the first age group but there are designated principal roles in the construction of new *Arijus* and repairs in the old ones.

Punishments are meted out to the first three age groups but the fourth and the groups above them are exempted from hard labour and punishments. The fourth age group consists of the master artisans and trainers who are entrusted to train the younger age groups in various specialised trades. The fifth group, the second most senior group is engaged in monetary matters and it handles the financial aspects of the *Ariju*. The sixth group comprises the commanders of the *Ariju* and is the overall in-charge of all activities and matters pertaining to the *Ariju*. They are the commanders, administrators, rules and controllers of the *Ariju* life.

The sixth age group is the subordinate body of the overall village administration. They can directly impose fines on culprits and law-breakers in the village. They settle disputes between *züngas*, they organise feasts and lead war dances and tend to the village welfare activities. They are the military force on command, ready to defend the village. It is from this group, that members are inducted into the village council, the *Putu Menden*.

The *Ariju* is under the overall supervision of the *Tir* (Father of the *Ariju*), who is also its religious head. The selection of the *Tir* is based on status,

wealth, knowledge of war tactics, bravery and heroism (especially in bringing hunted heads), contributions to the life of the *Ariju* and generally a man much respected for his integrity and leadership qualities. As the Father of the *Ariju*, the *Tir* may not actually fight wars but he strategises and directs wars and it is under his generalship, wars are fought. He also performs all religious ceremonies before and after wars. He predicts omens and can postpone wars. As the Father of the *Ariju*, the *Tir* further performs all religious sacrifices and heads the management of the *Ariju*. In him is vested the powers to reward and punish. The *Tir* enjoys an indisputable and prominent place in the village society. This is underscored by the fact that the *Tir* lends paddy for festivals and he takes care of other unforeseen expenditure. He mediates between the village councillors and the *Ariju* members during times of crisis. The *Tir*'s tenure is unlimited and he may continue till death or till age or infirmity prevents him from shouldering his responsibilities.

In Ao society, every member of the *zūnga* maintains his/her identity and prestige from childhood till they die and it is the *Ariju* that formalises this arrangement. Even much after the British colonials and American missionaries came and left Nagaland, much of the *Ariju*

traditions are still practiced, not physically and literally, but through very modern ways and perspectives. Even today, on occasions like weddings, deaths and festivals, each age group has its responsibilities well defined and well shouldered too. Every year between Christmas and New Year, a general meeting of all male citizens, wherever they currently reside, is held in each Ao village and young men belonging to the various age groups are present in the village to attend to their tasks during 2-3-day meetings in the village.

Another very encouraging aspect of the age group system is the social obligations they meet collectively. There are increasing number of instances wherein particular age groups have established schools, homes for senior citizens, hostels, libraries, etc. in their villages although most members of the age group may no longer live in the village.

### **Continuing Social Relevance**

The greatest impact of the traditional Ao *Ariju* is its role as the cementing force in all social and societal aspects of tribal life, which still guides the modern Ao. The *Ariju* also imbibes a strong sense of responsibility towards the community, without which a small tribe like the Ao, as also other Naga tribes, would have been blown away like dried leaves, by the

**As the Father of the Ariju, the Tir further performs all religious sacrifices and heads the management of the Ariju. In him is vested the powers to reward and punish. The Tir enjoys an indisputable and prominent place in the village society. This is underscored by the fact that the Tir lends paddy for festivals and he takes care of other unforeseen expenditure.**

storms of modernity. The *Ariju* also strengthens the bonds of individuals with the collective and it is these bonds that tie Naga society into a closely-knit entity and helps the Naga society face the uncertainties of newer ages that had dawned with the arrival of the British colonials and American missionaries, who brought in modern education, an alien religion, hitherto unknown value systems, unheard of ideologies, and political, economic and social systems and structures to a very different traditional Naga society.

Although the role and position of the *Ariju* has changed with the advent of the British colonials and American missionaries, the significance and impact of this institution still remains central to the Ao Naga in several ways. It is this institution, after all, that imbibes all knowledge and education on how to conduct life for the Ao Naga, be it in the family and home, be it amongst villagers and villages, be it trade and commerce, agriculture and allied activities like handloom, handicrafts and other crafts, dances, music, war or diplomacy.

However, it is not only boys that have been privileged to have a seat of learning in the Ao village. There were *Arijus* for girls too but because women have a secondary position in a basically patriarchal Naga society, *Arijus*

for girls were never accorded the importance they should have been given. Because boys and girls were not allowed to enter each other's *Arijus* both the seats of learning were considered to be sacred to each of the sexes. In the girls' *Ariju*, they were taught the traditional roles and responsibilities accorded to women in any patriarchal society. And the girl's *Ariju* functioned much like the boys except for training in warfare and other activities that were held to be men's prerogative. The girls' *Arijus* too functioned along the age group system. The concept of 'co-ed' was not practiced, which could also indicate a highly developed sense of morality among the traditional Ao villagers.

An Ao woman's worth is traditionally measured by the quality of the handloom she produces and the finest was taught in the girls' *Ariju*, as also her culinary proficiency. Community feasting is an integral part of the Ao village but the fact that they cannot be held without collective efforts was well-imbibed in the young boys and girls, who were assigned specific tasks to perform for the success of the community feasts. Each individual's contribution was accepted in the form of tasks he/she performed for the success of these feasts, and some of these community events do include weddings and funerals.

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The Ao village has a very well-defined system of village administration, which requires knowledge and the *Ariju* provides education to acquire this knowledge. The Ao village also has traditional and historical trade and diplomatic ties with other Ao and non-Ao villages, as also with villages now in the State of Assam. It takes a lot of learning for the younger generations to continue these ties and this is where the education imparted in the *Ariju* comes in handy. The Assam and Nagaland border disputes are well-known and despite some very unfortunate tragedies over the decades, much disaster has been averted simply on the strength of the traditional and historical ties of Ao villages with those of neighbouring Assam. The knowledge of traditions and history required to maintain diplomatic ties is not taught in modern schools and colleges and this is where the education imparted in the *Ariju* supplements modern day political leaders, bureaucrats and law enforcers.

***Ariju* and Traditional Knowledge:** The other important feature of the *Ariju* is that it imparts traditional knowledge that is today conceded to have scientific basis. Agriculture is not a random activity in Ao society. It is, in fact, the mainstay of Naga society. Agriculture in Ao society is practiced

along very sound environment friendly principles. Even the much-condemned *jhum* cultivation was traditionally practiced according to a 15-year gap, time enough for the soil to rejuvenate. Planting, sowing and harvesting was done according to propitious times taking into consideration the condition of the soil, the quantity of rainfall and other climatic and weather conditions. The younger generations were taught the values of the innumerable herbs and medicinal plants that grow wild in the jungle, as also the vegetables, fruits, berries that heal and can also be used as dyes for traditional Naga handloom and handicrafts. Protection of the environment, wildlife, traditional means of pest control, fishing without destroying the wealth abounding in our rivers and streams, preserving trees and other flora, as also killing domestic animal for food without causing pain, livestock management, introduction of varieties of seeds and their preservation techniques of grain storage system, forest management etc. were also taught in the *Ariju*.

Aos are still much dictated and directed by customs and traditions that keep the personal, private, public and professional life well-oiled. From the way to conduct oneself in a wedding or a funeral to what clothes any occasion demands are issues that

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are very well defined. Customs and traditions, which involve all kinds of relationships, whether marital or otherwise, are also unambiguous in Ao society and the *Ariju* is the seat of learning which imparts the required knowledge on Ao customs and traditions. An Ao, who shows a lack of knowledge of customs and traditions, which is called *Subaliba*, is considered to be an uneducated person even if he/she has a post-doctoral degree from the finest university in the country or abroad.

Story telling, passing down of the oral traditions, folklore, rituals, ceremonies, matrimonial relations, family management, art of speech, recitation of poems and renditions of songs, training in traditional musical instruments etc, were all taught in the *Ariju* too. Clearly, the *Ariju* taught a youth how to survive, how to make a living and how to live and bond with other individuals and the collective.

***Ariju and Democracy:*** The Ao village is not only well-structured and highly organised but also governed in a very simple but at the same time sophisticated manner, which has all the salient features of a modern democracy. The objective of the education imparted in the *Ariju* is done keeping in mind that every

citizen has responsibilities, as much as rights, and that to be able to play the roles, shoulder the responsibilities and enjoy the rights, one must acquire the necessary knowledge and education as much as acquire the wisdom to enable the smooth functioning of these democratic ideals, principles and traditions.

Certainly, the importance of the traditional *Ariju* cannot be over-emphasised even in today's liberalised, privatised and globalised world. In fact, there is a need to revive the best that the *Ariju* can still offer in consonance with modern day education. The knowledge era into which we have entered has to be strengthened with a synthesis of the old and the new to recycle and rehabilitate our tired world.

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# Meanderings in Assam

*Pradip Acharya*

There is an enchanting Jaintia village called Jatinga some nine kilometers from Haflong, the district headquarters of the North Cachar Hills in district of Assam. Jatinga is a *Jeme Naga* word meaning the 'Pathway of rain and water'. The village is on a longish hump with the lofty Barail hills on one side. A deep valley stretches towards it where birds are supposed to come to die. It so happened that the Jeme Nagas, while rounding up stray cattle one evening with lit bamboo torches, were shocked out of their wits to find birds descending on them in hordes. They readily sold off their land to the Jaintias for a paltry sum and moved on. The Jaintias, too, saw the same thing happen as they sat round a campfire telling stories and gossiping at the hour when dogs howl at ghosts. They thought it was a blessing from heaven and started making a sport of killing and capturing the birds by attracting them with lit bamboo torches. These days, they use hurricanes and mantle-lamps.

On dark moonless nights when there is a thick fog and the direction of the wind is right, birds come in hordes to the Jatinga valley wherever they see light. There is often a slight

drizzle at the time. It starts in late August and continues till November. Birds do not commit suicide. It remains a human prerogative. They are killed by birdlighting as the process is called. Much the same thing happens in the Philippines. Studies show that almost all the birds are diurnal; they are juveniles, that is, they belong to the current year's brood, and have no previous experience of the valley. They are, almost entirely, water birds. The time coincides with their feeding and training hours. Their tender wings are wet and heavy with the fog and rain and they are lost. They fly to the comparative safety of illumined spaces. The Assam forest department has put up a watch tower with powerful search lights which attract more birds than the mantle-lamps of the villagers. They are caught, studied and freed. The myth that they refuse food in captivity is just, a myth.

This is accessible history and is often written about. In fact, we are so used to the written word that we forget that there were centuries of literature before the first word came to be written. Folk tales, songs, riddles etc. (oral literature) lengthen our past, and they are

**Studies show that almost all the birds are diurnal; they are juveniles, that is, they belong to the current year's brood, and have no previous experience of the valley. They are, almost entirely, water birds. The time coincides with their feeding and training hours.**

**Assamese is the major language spoken by the people of the Brahmaputra valley and the adjacent hills. It is used as the link language by the various ethnic communities of the region.**

handed down from generation to generation, and in places like Assam, they persist till this day. They change and are often added to. They are living memory, not ethnography. They are tales and songs I remember from when I was a wee lad. The Jaintias had close ties with the *Ahoms*, who ruled Assam for six hundred years from the thirteenth century to the nineteenth. The famed annals or chronicles written during the *Ahom* rule also include one *Jaintia Buranji* or The History of the Jaintias. The village Jatinga, however, is in Dimasa land and the Dimasas are concentrated in the North Cachar Hills district. They belong to the greater Bodo group of people who are the largest ethnic community in the plains of Assam. They are, in fact, a civilisation, for they had built cities. The remains of Dimapur, Maibong and Khaspur are still extant. The Bodos and the Assamese have a lot in common because of centuries of close contact. Assamese is the major language spoken by the people of the Brahmaputra valley and the adjacent hills. It is used as the link language by the various ethnic communities of the region. The *Misings*, for instance, celebrate their *Bihu* over a long period in the fields, by the river and even in the wilderness. The spring festival *Bihu* was initially looked down upon by the elite classes in both

Assamese and Mising society as being vulgar and too 'physical'. But the Assamese are known all over for their *Bihu* now and the Misings swear by it. This is how the Misings celebrate *Bihu* in their songs called *oi-nitom*:

O my dear one,  
*Bihu* is already here

Let's go and play *Bihu* as the  
drums beat and cymbals ring

Koels are crooning *Bihu* songs  
and I go mad, am possessed.

My darling, you're a *Bihu* blossom  
sprouting from the earth

and me an orchid hanging from a  
tree, swaying in the wind,

for this is the *Bihu* season, dear,  
the hour of love blossoming.

Come, let's too flower and talk  
matters of the heart.

The *Karbis* are another important ethnic community of Assam. They are hill dwellers and are concentrated in the *Karbi Anglong* district but have also spilled over to the plains. Basically animists, the *Karbis* have, however, down the ages, absorbed some elements of Hinduism in folk forms. Their rich oral literature includes the *Karbi Ramayana* called *Sabin Alun*. This is not a translation of the great epic. The entire Ramayana story is retold and recast in the model of *Karbi*

society and culture. Birth and death are considered the two most important events in Karbi life. Chomangkan, largely a death ritual, is celebrated like a community festival. The Karbis differ from the other communities in that their most important festival is associated with death and not with planting or harvest or the advent of spring.

Assamese has over a thousand year old tradition of written literature but a rich folk tradition is vitally alive even now especially in the festivities relating to the coming of spring and the harvest. The Assamese spring festival *Bihu* has its parallel in most of the other communities. The *bagarumba* of the *Bodos*, the *ali-ai-Irigang* of the Misings and the *Bihu* of the Assamese are singularly beautiful song and dance ensembles which are still meaningful and are not a string of obscure gestures when meanings are lost. Here the folk and the modern live side by side. In like manner, different religions also meet here and influence one another. In one of the greatest *tantric* seats, Kamakhya, there are panels showing vignettes from the life of the Buddha and a few secular frescos. I have come across a peculiar nursery rhyme, with amusing absurdities, in the lower districts of Assam, which



*Bihu Dance*

is supposed to belong originally to a mystic cult:

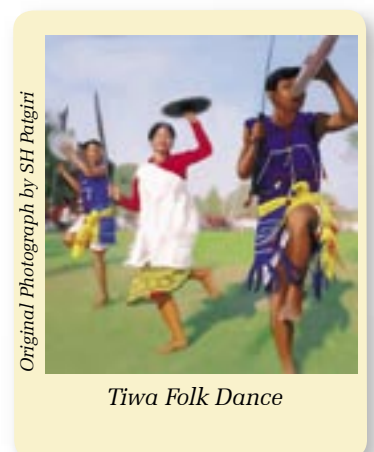
The duck chases the civet away

As the owl looks on

The roast fish in the fire-place

Plan gobbling the tomcat

It may also have the riddle element which makes verse more complex. As it is, all the communities in Assam have their own rich store of riddles which are now being threatened by the modern quiz. Children are amused by unusual linkages. The surprise element and the peculiar pleasure of discovery still sustain the riddle. New riddles continue to be made where airplanes and much later artifices figure. A quiz demands information and a quick memory recall but a riddle demands



*Tiwa Folk Dance*

Original Photograph by SH Patgiri



*Chitrabagawat, manuscript painting*

the life of the Thebans and the Pandavas respectively but the riddle in our communities is pure fun:

A two-tongued bird  
Black water drinks  
And spits out everything  
That man thinks. (a quill pen)

Why does this essay wander and why has it taken such a winding course? The answer lies in a folk belief of the Assamese, popular in the Nagaon district of Assam. Three tributaries, Kalang, Kapili and Dizu meet the Brahmaputra to see the sea. Why have they taken such a zigzag, tortuous path? Their guide was the wily, dodging fox.

Original Photograph by SH Patgiri



*Satriya Dance*

imagination and synthesis. The modern child may not be able to solve a riddle without any hazard to himself or his community but his pleasure is genuine when it is explained and he begins to see. The fateful riddles of the Sphinx and the Yaksha involved

# Manipur: Women's World?

*Tayenjam Bijoykumar Singh*

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A nation's culture resides in the hearts and in the soul of its people.

– M.K. Gandhi

*Is the sky higher  
He, our Father, is still higher.  
Is the earth heavier  
She, our Mother, is still heavier.*

– An old Manipuri Verse

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## Markets run by Women

Anyone visiting Manipur for the first time cannot help but wonder at seeing a market run entirely by women. All the vendors are women. Most of the buyers also comprise women. Inside the market, on rows of raised platforms, covered with corrugated iron sheets for shelter from the elements of nature, women sell everything from vegetables and fishes to clothes and cosmetics. Women's market, popularly known as *Ima* (Ema) Keithel lies in the heart of Kwairamband Keithel (Kwairamband Bazar) in the centre of Imphal city. In Manipur, markets are ruled by women which also serve as a meeting place for gossip and to exchange ideas and views.

Another name of *Ima Keithel* is *Sana Keithel* (Sana Keithen) or royal market. It is one of the ten markets dedicated by

*Meetingu Khakempa* (Meidingu Khagemba) in the year 1614 AD. The other nine markets are: (1) Awang Keithen, (2) Kha Keithen, (3) Phayeng (Phabang) Keithen, (4) Moirang Keithen, (5) Andro Keithen, (6) Khooman Keithen, (7) Kwa Keithen, (8) Kondong Keithen and (9) Chairen Keithen. Some of the markets were named after valiant warriors and heroes of war. For some markets, the purpose of running and items to be traded were specifically assigned.

In the women's market, the vendors have their own terms for everything. Insulting and contemptuous terms are often used to express love, satisfaction, appreciation, etc, bewildering those who overhear them. Ordinary words like full, half, quarter, less and more have hidden meanings. Once they come to the market,

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these women metamorphose from their original selves and assume the image of *Emas*. This simple word '*Ema*' meaning 'mother' when colloquially used assumes a unique personality akin to the Amazons of the Greek mythology. Irrespective of age, caste and creed, every vendor at the women's market is an *Ema*. It is difficult for the outsider to comprehend what they feel and why they behave in such a strange manner, for when they laugh it may mean they are actually crying. To a casual visitor, they always seem so happy and radiant.

The women's market is indicative of the position women hold in Manipuri society. They excel in weaving, arts, crafts and sporting practices. They have kept the culture and traditions of Manipur alive. It is interesting to note that it was a combination of curious events which has led to the unique nature of the markets in Manipur. The facts may be traced back in the olden days when the then Manipur was an independent kingdom.

In their domestic life, men had to do all the works that were considered strenuous and required great physical exertion and strength. Since men were engaged in their duties to the state – in the work required physical strength – the remaining tasks which they could not complete and which

were considered lighter were left to the women. And spinning, weaving and small trade had become women's responsibility. For cultivating rice, men ploughed the paddy fields while transplantation of rice plants was left to the women. Every woman was versed in weaving. In every house, women wove cotton cloth for their family and husband. Girls of respectable families learnt dancing, where in those times, in other parts of the country, dancing as a profession was looked down upon. So much so for the division of labour, if circumstances compelled, women did not hesitate to take up arms to protect their sovereignty. During the reign of *Meidingu Ningthoukhomba* (Meidingu Ningthoukhomba) who ascended the throne in 1443 AD, his queen, *Meitei Reima Linthoi Ngambi* (Meitei Leima Linthoi Ngambi) subdued an armed revolt by highland dwellers.

War results in casualty on both sides. Only the numbers may differ. When the male head of a family is killed or imprisoned, the mother has to fill in the gap caused by the patriarch's absence. She has to work to bring up the children. It is a necessity that cannot be overlooked. In the old days, since Manipur was often at war to keep off invaders and protect its borders, the number of families with women as the heads was comparatively

**Girls of respectable families learnt dancing, where in those times, in other parts of the country, dancing as a profession was looked down upon.**

high. This resulted in women coming out of the house to earn livelihood.

### **Nupi Lal: Women in Independence Struggle**

Women had come to the forefront many times in the past to protest and fight against the state authorities. At least two of such incidents are known as Nupi Lal or women's war. In 1904, residential buildings of three British Officers and some other houses at Khwairamband Bazar including the house of the Assistant Political Agent were completely gutted down by fire. The British Resident, H. St. P. Maxwell suspected foul play. Six Rajkumars or men of royal blood were convicted and sentenced to rigorous imprisonment.

The matter did not end with the conviction of the six Rajkumars. Maxwell forced the natives to rebuild the house of the Assistant Political Agent and ordered them to supply all the materials locally available. The honour of men was at stake. They could not openly revolt, the resounding defeat they had faced at the hands of the British in 1891 had not still worn off from their memory, nor were they willing to work as bonded labours for the alien master. They fled and went into hiding. Maxwell was not deterred. He sent out his men to capture the fleeing men and bring them back. The unfortunate ones

who got caught were severely thrashed and forced to work.

The irked women could no longer remain as silent spectators while their men were being tortured and made to work as bonded labourers. They protested against the order of Maxwell. He had to submit to the courage of the determined women. The women's uprising in 1904 is now known as the first Nupi Lal.

Women came to the forefront again in 1930. It was when the government decided to introduce a new tax. People resented it but the President of the Durbar, an Englishman, tried to enforce it. When he came out to meet the women resisting the enforcement of the new tax, he was bundled into a pond by them.

His successor, G.P. Stewart, I.C.S., faced a more dangerous situation. He went to inquire a dispute about fishing in the Loktak Lake. He was put in a boat with some local leaders. Women stood on the shore, shouting, screaming and hurling abuses at them. Stewart could not help submitting to the women. Only after he conceded to their demands he was allowed to return to the base.

The second Nupi Lal was for a reason, altogether different. In 1939, floods caused extensive damage to the standing

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**The woes of the farmers were compounded when unexpected hailstorms in mid-November caused further damage to the laden paddy plants left standing in the fields after the floods had claimed their shares. The farmers were gripped with the fear of starvation.**

crops. The State Durbar, in apprehension of food shortage, passed a resolution to ban the export of rice in September. The woes of the farmers were compounded when unexpected hailstorms in mid-November caused further damage to the laden paddy plants left standing in the fields after the floods had claimed their shares. The farmers were gripped with the fear of starvation. They tried to salvage whatever they could from the paddy fields. Much to their displeasure, the ban was suddenly lifted when harvest was in full swing. At the onset of winter, prices kept soaring and paddy had almost vanished from the market.

It was the women again who came out to fight the unjust decision of lifting the ban on the export of rice. On December 11, 1939, when the woman traders arrived at Khwairamband Bazar to do their business, they were disappointed to see that not even a morsel of rice was available in the market. Famished as they were, they could not control their anger. The women, in thousands, marched straight to the Durbar to lodge their complaints and demand re-imposition of the ban.

At that time the Maharaja, Sir Churachand Singh was away in Nabadwip on pilgrimage. T.A. Sharpe, I.C.S., the President of the Durbar pleaded his inability

saying it was the Maharaja's prerogative to sanction the ban. He reluctantly agreed to get in touch with the Maharaja telegraphically and obtain his sanction. With the women following him he went to the telegraph office. After sending a telegram to the Maharaja, he thought he had done his duty. He tried to leave but the women blocked his way, kept him encircled and requested to stay on to receive the reply. They pleaded that they were famished since the previous day – if they could stay on an empty stomach and wait, why couldn't he remain for a few more hours for the Maharaja's reply. What the women did could be described as 'Gherao' or keeping a person of authority surrounded by a group of people to make him fulfil their demand.

On learning of the confinement of Sharpe, the President of the Durbar, a British Major from the 4<sup>th</sup> Assam Rifles and the Civil Surgeon, another British officer, came to the Telegraph office to help him. They were allowed to enter but exit was simply impossible as the agitation had gained momentum. The women started hailing and shouting slogans. By afternoon, a platoon under the command of a British Officer arrived to free the Britons kept in detention. A scuffle ensued and hell broke loose. In the ensuing melee, many women were injured. Twenty-one of



them were reportedly wounded by bayonets and gun-butts.

Those injured in the afternoon remained turning and groaning without proper medical treatment. It was only after ten at night they were admitted to hospital. However, no member of the public was allowed to visit them. None of the famished women went home. They held their ground braving the icy cold wintry night of December till the wee hours before daybreak. They disbursed only after learning that the British Civil and Military Officers had made good their escape and vanished. The next day a message was received from the Maharaja sanctioning the re-imposition of the ban. The unarmed women had won the 'Battle'.

### **Women against Alcoholism**

In the olden days, there was a curious customary practice of keeping vigil at night by the men of a locality whenever there was a threat to the lives and properties of the people in the area. It was compulsory for all the families in the area to send at least one member as a representative for the purpose. The representatives of the families divided themselves into small groups and kept vigil at night on rotation. The number of persons in a group varied according to their convenience. Such a practice was known as 'Rong Chatpa'. Women

however were exempted from participating in such activities.

In the early seventies, a new threat loomed large in the horizon in the form of alcoholism which had become a social menace. Following the steps of 'Rong Chatpa', many local clubs and organisations tried to check and curtail the consumption of alcoholic drinks especially by the youths but they ran into trouble. Most of the time the persons consuming alcoholic drinks and those trying to oppose them came to blows. It often resulted in personal enmity. And consumption of alcoholic drinks continued unabated.

In the early eighties, alcoholism reached its zenith. Heroin also made its presence felt. However hard local clubs and organisations tried to check drug abuse, they could not fight the might of those powerful but faceless persons who minted money by supplying the illicit substance. Women stepped in when their male counterparts had failed to control the situation. Social organisations of women called 'Nisha Bund' sprang up in quick succession in all the localities. They took over the duty of keeping vigil at night to punish anyone found drinking and those indulging in drugs. They also kept a watch on the supply and sale of hooch and illicit drugs. Nisha Bund groups of neighbouring localities

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helped one another in chasing and catching anyone consuming, supplying and selling alcoholic drinks and illicit drugs. Those caught were fined and let off after giving a stern warning.

They had a curious form of communication. When any member of a Nisha Bund group needed help, she would give a signal by banging at a nearby electric steel pole with a piece of rock. The message would be relayed by other members in a similar way. In no time, all the members would come running to the spot. In those days it was not surprising to hear the sound of banging of electric steel poles ‘Kang ... kang ...’ in the middle of the night. The number of times and the pace of banging carried different meanings, including messages in code.

### Myth

*Panthoibi* of the Meitei Pantheon is a Pre-Hindu goddess. She is mentioned in some old Manipuri texts like *Numit Kappa* (written in the first half of the tenth century AD), *Leithak Leikharon* (written in the first half of the seventeenth century AD), *Panthoibi Kongkul* (written in the second half of the seventeenth century AD) and *Panthoibi Naheiol* (written in the second half of the seventeenth century AD). The last two books are solely devoted to her. In the beginning, she did not occupy a prominent place.

In *Numit Kappa*, she is a minor goddess. She is sent to persuade *Numit* (the sun) to come out of hiding. In *Leithak Leikharon*, she kills a powerful demon. During the course of the battle, if his blood falls on the ground, an exact copy of him emerges. *Panthoibi* spreads her tongue to cover the entire battlefield. She swallows the demon after killing him. *Panthoibi Kongkul* relates the story of two lovers, *Panthoibi* and *Nongpok*, under extraordinary circumstances. *Panthoibi Naheiol* relates the pang of lovelorn *Panthoibi* on her separation from *Nongpok*. The two lovers are ultimately united. In mythology the attributes of gods and goddesses change through the passage of time. By the end of the sixteenth century AD, she had become a major goddess with a large following. Temples were built for her. She had been described as a powerful goddess. The attributes of all female divinities coalesced to form *Panthoibi*, embodiment of all the forms of energy – the goddess of war. Ballad singers sing her glory and story tellers relate her tale.

### Women’s world?

Manipuri women have the legacy of running small businesses and coming to the forefront at the time of crisis. They have adapted to the needs of the time very well. Now, they have taken big strides in the field of education. There is no sphere of education where

In mythology the attributes of gods and goddesses change through the passage of time.

they have not entered. They have also excelled in the field of games and sports. The Manipur's women's team in football is among the best in India.

In the past, women did not have any place in administration though some of them might have directly or indirectly influenced the authorities in making important decisions. This also speaks well of the present. To

an outsider, women in Manipur seem to hold superior positions in the society. It may be because of the impression the women give while running the markets and their readiness to come to the forefront in times of crises. They still have not acquired parity with men. However powerful they may seem to be, in public domain they are still awaiting the full realisation of their potential and power.

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# ‘TLAWMNGAIHNA’: Uniquely Mizo

*Margaret Ch. Zama*

The Mizo, used as a generic term here to include all tribes and sub-tribes under *Zo hnahtlak* or ‘those sharing common descent’, may be considered amongst the more recent settlers in their present settlements within the region of North-East India as well as neighbouring Myanmar. Being of Mongoloid stock and belonging to the Tibeto-Burman language group, the history of their migration trails from Central Asia south of through China was in all likelihood part of a series of movement of people of common stock and spread over a long period of time in the remote past. Due to the absence of reliable material evidence such as written scripts or archaeological findings, the Mizo history and study of their culture has been constructed, solely based on oral tradition handed down through the generations in the form of narratives, legends and tales, songs, sayings and the like.

The social structure of Mizo life from early times was predominantly community-based as this was essential for their survival and the common

good. The fear of enemy raids, wild beasts and other disasters was amongst the main reasons for their bonding. This necessitated the institution of the *zawbuk* or bachelors’ dormitory at the centre of the village within calling distance from the chieftain’s house. It thus followed that the social and moral values developed by a person took their orientation from services rendered to the community, and the measure of one’s worth and status was dependant on the quality of such a contribution. Thus was born the concept of *tlawmngaihna* (noun), providing the core or heart of Mizo values. In its essence, *tlawmngaihna* simply means service to others, even to the point of laying down one’s life, without expecting anything in return. One who is *tlawmngai* (verb) is one who is self-sacrificing, self-denying, stoical, persevering and self-respecting. A person who practices this virtue makes light of personal injuries no matter how fatal it may be, does whatever an occasion may demand no matter how distasteful or inconvenient it may be to oneself or to one’s

***Tlawmngaihna* (noun), providing the core or heart of Mizo values. In its essence, *tlawmngaihna* simply means service to others, even to the point of laying down one’s life, without expecting anything in return. One who is *tlawmngai* (verb) is one who is self-sacrificing, self-denying, stoical, persevering and self-respecting.**

own inclinations, and never retreats from any situation no matter how dangerous.<sup>1</sup>

The Mizo has numerous tales of legendary heroes who have lived this concept and who are still held up as role models for the present day generation. Taitesena and Vanapa are two such heroes still held in high esteem.<sup>2</sup>

Ralthatchhunga, better known as Taitesena due to his rosy cheeks as a child, was born at Khawrihnim in 1880 and belonged to the Kiangte clan. He lost his father at the tender age of 12, while his mother remarried soon after, leaving him and his sister to be brought up by their paternal uncle named Pahanga. Some say that his mother was an adulteress due to which the young boy carried a lifelong scar. Life was difficult for the orphaned Taitesena and his sister. It is said that the stories of brave men greatly influenced him as an adolescent and he often lost sleep over them. He became known for his bravery and perseverance under great pain, even from a young age. On one occasion while out in the woods, his foot got severely cut as a result of which he could barely walk on his own. When

his companions saw the extent of the wound they tried to carry him but he steadfastly refused, so in the end they had to literally trip him off his feet and carry him. It is said that he cried all the way back to their village not because of the pain suffered but due to the humiliation of having to burden others.

Another tale of Taitesena's practice of *tlawmngaihna* was at an occasion when he was part of a hunting party that spent ten nights out in the deep woods. Despite suffering from a very painful boil, he remained in the forefront, cutting a path through the forest for the party that followed. On their way back after this successful hunt, each one carried on their backs a heavy load of makeshift baskets filled with smoked meat. As was the practice, family and friends welcomed them back at the village entrance, relieving them of their burden. Taitesena refused the offer of his younger sister Kawlhnuaii declaring, "It is not such a heavy load that I need to be relieved. Just follow me." But at her insistence the load was taken from his back and it was discovered that the basket had been glued to his back with the pus from the boil that had burst. His companions

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<sup>1</sup> Dictionary of the Lushai Language by James Herbert Lorrain (Pu Buanga), The Asiatic Society, Calcutta, first published in 1940 and reprinted in 1975. p 513

<sup>2</sup> The life of Taitesena depicted here has been sourced from Zoram Encyclopedia by B.Thangliana, published by Remkungi, 1<sup>st</sup> edition, 2003. pp 593-598 & pp700-706.

marveled at his stoicism for he had not complained nor shown any sign of pain throughout the rough days spent in the deep woods. He was always among the first to help with any chore that needed to be performed. In this way, the *tlawmngai* Taitesena's fame began to grow.

Once while out on another hunt, one of his elders or *val upa* as they were called, espied a stone along the riverbed that would have made an ideal whetstone, but though he yearned for it, he did not take it as it was heavy and they still had a long way to go. On reaching home, Taitesena handed him the stone saying, "Here, I have brought home for you the stone that you so wanted." This act of respect and consideration at the cost of personal sacrifice left the elder touched and embarrassed.

Taitesena's family finally settled at Serhmun village. The young men of the village often bullied the younger boys and were in the habit of sending them on all sorts of errands while the youngsters dared not protest, much less refuse. Taitesena abhorred this practice and determined to put an end to it. He would stand guard at the *bawhbel* which was the beam atop the barrier at the entrance of the *zawlbuk*. So whenever the young men ordered the boys to go on an errand Taitesena would immediately say, "Since I am

already standing here, it would be faster if I did the needful," and would leave to do their bidding. Very soon the practice stopped as it dawned on everyone that it was Taitesena who was their errand boy. Such were the ways in which he contributed to social reforms in his village. Unimpressive in appearance, simple in attire, he slept through winter and summer in the enclosed verandah of the *zawlbuk* with only a single *puan* which is the Mizo hand woven cloth. He was never fastidious nor ever complained about the food he was served and it is said that three handful of rice was all that he would eat at mealtimes, be it at home or out in the forest. On one occasion, while thatching the *zawlbuk* roof, the weather turned foul and started raining while a chilly wind constantly blew. All but Taitesena eventually remained and he worked on as though completely unaware of the cold and rain until the other young men forcibly pulled him down.

One night, the chief of their village Hrangvunga decided to find out who was the bravest and most *tlawmngai* young man of the village. He called one of his elders at dead of night and declared, "See here, I require a messenger for an urgent errand. The night is dark but I shall have no sleep tonight unless someone is sent. Go and find out if anyone from the *zawlbuk*

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is willing to go.” When the elder went to convey the chief’s request, no one responded, but Taitesena from the enclosed verandah quietly prepared to leave, inquiring where he was to go. Since the elder did not know, he went to seek instructions from the chief. On seeing him the chief said, “Taitesena, I have neither errand nor need of a messenger tonight. All I wanted to know was who would make the effort to give of their best for their chief and the welfare of their village community. Here, let us drink from my stock of the best and sweetest rice beer.” The young man refused and made to leave, but the chief insisted and was finally able to persuade him to hold a drink.

The next morning, the Town crier at the instructions of the chief, went round the village throughout the forenoon making the loud announcement that “Out of the three hundred youth of Serhmun, Taitesena is the most *tlawmngai*, and one who loves his chief the most.” Taitesena was embarrassed at the honour conferred, and declared, “If only such an announcement were not made! From now on, one will have to perform tasks that one is not really capable of.”

Many more stories are told about this extraordinary hero who truly epitomised the unique concept of Mizo *tlawmngaihna*, but the legend surrounding his



tragic death at the young age of 22 is the most remarkable.

Taitesena along with Dozika, Zingkela, and Vungtawna were renowned as the *Pasaltha* or brave hunters of Serhmun village. One day, word of a rogue tiger in the vicinity of their village was reported so they set a spear-trap which mortally wounded the tiger during the night. The band of *pasaltha* wanted to immediately go after the tiger during the night but was forbidden to do so by their village chief. They set out in the morning with Dozika, Zingkela and Vungtawna taking the lead. The three eventually spotted the wounded tiger sheltering in a small ravine. Vungtawna triggered three shots but each time the gun missed fire. It turned out that in his haste, he had taken the damaged gun of his house-guest. Zingkela came

**Vana Pa is the other well-known Mizo hero other than Taitesena, who lived the concept of Mizo 'tlawmngaihna' in letter and spirit, one still looked upon as an icon and role model by the present generation.**

after the tiger with his barbed headed spear piercing it, but the wounded beast caught him and snapped at him on the shoulder before violently throwing him aside. Vungtawna poked and pushed with his gun but the tiger leaned towards him and taking his head within its jaws held him aloft. Dozika rushed in and struck the tiger with his dao but his strike was not effective enough. In the midst of the struggle, one of the hunters nearby threw his spear at the tiger which unfortunately landed on Dozika's throat. The accompanying crowd just stood and watched from a distance for none dared enter the deadly fray.

Taitesena with his group were tracking the tiger's footprints on the other side of the hill when, on hearing the commotion rushed to the rescue, shouting, "Why am I so late while friends are lying wounded and I still remain unscathed!" He was prevented from leaping in by the elders who held him fast, loathe to lose another brave man, but he broke free and rushed at the tiger, fearlessly striking it with his dao. The tiger attacked and wounded him in the thigh. Thus lay together the four brave hunters of Serhmun, all mortally wounded. The tiger finally died of bullet and spear wounds inflicted by the rest of the hunting party.

None of the four heroes died on the spot. The spear still embedded in the throat of Dozika who was carried home, was extracted with great difficulty for it had barbs. Yet the last words uttered by him before he died were, "Nobody has accidentally wounded me. I am dying due to the wounds inflicted by the tiger." The other three refused to be carried and made their way home with the support of others. Zingkela died while declaring there was no pain. Vungtawna tossed and turned due to the intense pain of his wounds, but died without uttering a groan.

Taitesena succumbed to his wounds the next day. It is said that his mother visited him, weeping and caressing him, saying "Taite, O how painful it is," but he responded, "No mother, it is not painful." He quietly admitted after she left, "How soothing the touch of one's birth mother!"

### **Vana Pa**

Vana Pa is the other well-known Mizo hero other than Taitesena, who lived the concept of Mizo 'tlawmngaihna' in letter and spirit, one still looked upon as an icon and role model by the present generation.

The story of how Vana Pa practiced 'tlawmngaihna' differs from Taitesena in that, while



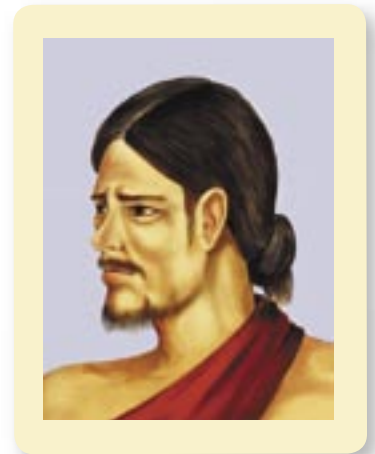
the latter became a legend as a brave warrior and hunter who sacrificed his life at the young age of 22 for his friends, Vana Pa was blessed with a long life, serving as a wise elder and advisor to three generations of great Sailo chiefs namely, Lalsavunga, Vanhnuailiana and Liankhama. But his chief claim to fame is that he was able to overcome the notorious fiery bad temper of his younger days by becoming one of the most unselfish, gracious and wise 'val upa', which means one from whom chiefs and common man alike sought advice and guidance, often a man well into his middle age.

Vana Pa's real name was Thangzachhinga but later came to be known as Vana pa, which literally means 'father of Vana', Vana being the shortened name of Vanchiauva, his son. Vana Pa was a talented craftsman whose chief skill lay in the art of finely splitting bamboo and cane for tying purposes and for weaving baskets, mats and other bamboo crafts. His extraordinary bad temper however made him few friends and it was said that ladies in particular avoided him due to their fear of angering him. Perhaps this explains his taking of a wife quite late in life, that is, at the age of 40.

Vana Pa eventually came to learn of the opinion of other

people regarding his bad temper and explosive disposition and therefore made a decision to redeem his reputation by learning to be gentle and gracious. When others came to learn of this, many undertook to test him in order to prove if he was really capable of changing his temperament. One day, while Vana Pa was busy weaving large bamboo trays for sifting grain called 'thlangra', a young man came and grabbing one of them, flung it up into the air. As Vana Pa watched it fly across, he simply exclaimed, "Look at how gently it floats. I shall fetch it myself," and after proceeding to pick it up, continued to work again. Another one came along, took the dao that Vana Pa was using and destroyed all his handiwork by chopping them up before his very eyes. To everyone's surprise, all that Vana Pa gently said was, "Well, it looks like I will have to make another lot after I have fetched more bamboos from the forest tomorrow".

On another occasion, while Vana Pa was sitting and enjoying the warm sun at the entry of the zawlbuk (bachelor's dormitory), a man came up to him and nipped off with a knife, the ornament that adorned his ear. Vana Pa had to pick up the pieces from beneath the zawlbuk where they had fallen saying, "Let me pick them up before the



**Vana Pa was a talented craftsman whose chief skill lay in the art of finely splitting bamboo and cane for tying purposes and for weaving baskets, mats and other bamboo crafts.**

hens get to peck them. It looks like I will have to string them all over again which I will do so at home, and wear them again". It is said that after this, no one ever tested him again for he had proved beyond a doubt that he had indeed turned over a new leaf.

Vana Pa time and again proved his mettle as a 'pasaltha' or notable brave warrior, under the chiefs that he served, taking the lead in several raiding parties and battles against other sub-tribes and clans. Under chief Lalsavunga at Aizawl, he helped to humble the Zadengs, raid the Thados at Mawmrang and fight the Hmars in Manipur. After the death of Lalsavunga, Vana Pa continued to be 'pasaltha' to the son and succeeding chief, Vanhnuailiana under whom he made his mark in battles and raids against the Thlanrawn, Singsan, Changchhan and Haukip to name a few.

Renowned for his bravery and fulfilment of all the qualities of a 'pasaltha',<sup>3</sup> Vana Pa was also well known for his leadership amongst the young men who learnt valuable lessons of life from his wisdom and unselfish ways. Once, during a long raid against the Hmars which, though

successful, saw them run out of food, hungry and tired in the middle of nowhere. Adding to their woes was the discovery that a member of their raiding party was found to be missing. No one was willing to volunteer to go back and search for him despite the tempting reward of a ladleful of soft boiled rice called 'buhhawp'. Vana Pa rose to leave saying, "I shall go to fetch him". On his return, in answer to their queries, he related without embellishment, of how he found the missing person dead and covered his body to hide it from hungry tigers. When the party went to fetch the dead body, they were surprised to find that it had been safely buried in a knee deep trench that caused them to reflect and say, "How like Vana Pa, taking such extra effort and care when we all know just how hungry and tired he must have been".

On another occasion, Vana Pa led a hunting party into the deep forest to kill game. Exhausted for want of food, they camped to cook food, and in order to assuage their hunger they all shared the starchy rice extract by sucking one reedful each. Vana Pa then said, "I have certainly had my fill. My stomach feels as

<sup>3</sup> The qualities of a 'pasaltha' are those synonymous with 'tlawmngaihna' which entails self-sacrifice, taking unhesitating lead in times of danger, suffering grievous wounds without complaint and so on.

**Renowned for his bravery and fulfilment of all the qualities of a 'pasaltha', Vana Pa was also well known for his leadership amongst the young men who learnt valuable lessons of life from his wisdom and unselfish ways.**

taut as Raldanga's pellet-bow".<sup>4</sup> On another similar occasion Vana Pa came across a fig tree bearing fruits, and knowing how hungry and tired his hunting party was, immediately called to them. A young member unable to contain his hunger hurriedly began to eat the fruits before the others. Vana Pa gently chided him by saying, "Young brother, I have not eaten one fruit as yet, and none of your friends here store pebbles in their stomachs either". His 'tlawmngaihna' particularly in the face of hunger, was remarkable. Whenever Vana Pa led a hunting party deep into the woods, he made it a point to stock their makeshift camps with food and fire wood saying, "This is for the convenience of others who will follow."

There came a time when Vanhnuailiana in the heyday of 'Tualte vanglai'<sup>5</sup> succumbed to the vanities of his status and power as chief and lost the respect and esteem of his people. His frequent habit of 'nula rim' or courting of young girls in particular, annoyed the

common man but none had the courage to chide him until the composer Pakthanga did so in song thus:

Be gentle in public and fierce in  
the face of the enemy,

Cease to be a lover of young  
maids Chief,

We your subjects are shaken as by  
a quake, with shame.

The chief got the message and ceased to practice his obnoxious habit. But the damage had been done in terms of loss of reputation for the chief while in contrast, the respect and hero-worship for the band of 'pasaltha' under Vana Pa continued unabated. The story goes that during a hunt headed by the chief where they had to surround a full grown tiger, some of the younger hunters scrambled up a tree in fear at the angry roars of the wild beast. This annoyed chief Vanhnuailiana and he sharply reprimanded them for their cowardice but to no effect as none held him in esteem, and they continued to climb up

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<sup>4</sup> "Raldanga sairawkhreh ang mai" is an expression that refers to Raldanga who, according to an old Mizo tale, was a man known for his laziness who kept his pellet-bow idle and unused. So any reference to this simply means something idle or too satiated to move. Vana Pa's comment would be said in a humorous tone, denoting selfless 'tlawmngaihna' to set an example to others, to make light of hardships, for in truth, a reedful of thick rice starch cannot assuage the hunger of a grown man.

<sup>5</sup> Tualte was a village with 1000 houses which added to the fame of chief Vanhnuailiana, along with the achievements of the 12 'pasaltha' inherited from his father's time, Vana Pa being one of them. It denoted the extent of his power and influence. Many tall tales have emanated from this legendary place often referred to as 'Tualte vanglai', 'vanglai' denoting greatest prime or incomparable heyday.

even higher. Vana Pa then came over, gazed up at the young men and simply said, “Well, it appears that all the trustworthy ones are gathered this end and everything is in good hands. Let me go over to the other side”. The moment he left them, they hurriedly climbed down and unhesitatingly lined up, forming a blockade for the tiger.

This is said to be one of the many instances in which the common man revealed that he held Vana Pa in greater esteem than the chief. This eventually roused the jealousy of the chief and in his resentment he sought to humiliate Vana Pa. One day he gave Vana Pa a small parcel of salt<sup>6</sup> with the intention of raising the issue at a later occasion that would embarrass and disgrace him. But unknown to him, Vana Pa in his wisdom quietly stored it away. The occasion for the chief soon arose during a round of drinks in a public place, but Vana Pa took no offence at the chief’s reprimand and instead smilingly said, “So you have run out of salt? I will return the parcel

of salt you gifted me, which I have safely stored away”. After this experience the chief never once tried to humiliate Vana Pa again.

It is not clear how Vana Pa died, for some claim that he died near Moirang during a raid to Manipur, while another claim is that he died at Zawlnghak near Rabung. He did continue to follow his chief Liankhama from Lungfai to Khuanglam which was believed to be around 1871 by which time the legendary hero was frail with ill-health. It is said that loyal to the tradition of his status as a brave ‘pasaltha’, Vana Pa never did intend to die in the comfort of his home. He left home one morning to trek along Tuithloh riverlet towards Muvanlai where there was a ‘sih’<sup>7</sup> to probably hunt the wild animals that frequent such places to drink its warm and brackish water. It rained heavily the same evening. His dead body was believed to have been found in this area, prostrate on his face with his gun propped upright beside him.

<sup>6</sup> The value of salt in the days of the batter system should not be underestimated. It was a valuable ‘currency’.

<sup>7</sup> ‘sih’ is a small spring which according to legend is often haunted by evil spirits and which explains why the Mizo in the old days considered it unlucky to have their jhooms in the land near by. If at all a jhoom is made, then a sacrifice is necessary to appease the evil spirits. The warm and usually brackish water that oozes out of the ‘sih’ which is located in damp and muddy soil is in turn frequented as a water hole by wild animals and is therefore a favourite hunting spot for game hunters.

**Source:** The life of Vana Pa depicted here has been sourced from Zoram Encyclopedia by B.Lalthangliana and published by Remkungi, 1<sup>st</sup> edition, 2003 Pp700-706.

**It is said that loyal to the tradition of his status as a brave ‘pasaltha’, Vana Pa never did intend to die in the comfort of his home.**

# Cultural Spaces: North-East Tradition on Display

*Fr. Joseph Puthenpurakal  
DBCIC, Shillong*

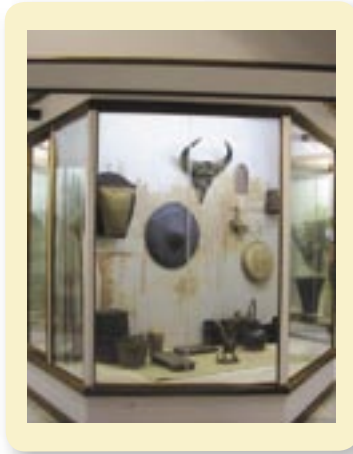
The key challenge facing communities or societies is the creation of political, economic and social strategies that promote peace, welfare and the preservation of the environment and culture on which life depends. Raising awareness of the north-east's cultural heritage, traditional knowledge and folklore ensures its consolidation so as to leave a legacy for the coming generations. Placing culture within the context of the natural and human environment makes it a living experience which continues to provide the essential identity necessary for an individual in today's multi-cultural world.

Museums help visitors to take time off to see, to reflect, to admire, to learn and be inspired. It also helps to come in touch with beauty – the beauty of creation, of art, of music and of human relationships. Museums, then become part of an integral, global and at the same time, value based education that respects the cultural richness of cultures other than one's own culture. Respect for other's culture leads to a dialogue of cultures which ultimately helps



us to live in peace and harmony, thereby enjoying the cultural wealth of each other.

In this regard, the DBCIC (Don Bosco Centre for Indigenous Cultures) situated at Mawlai, Shillong, is a centre for the display and conservation of the diamond-faceted traditions of the north-east. It visualises a healthy and productive communion of cultures for a culture of peace, harmony and development for north-east India, affirming and strengthening the identity of each people, especially the small and marginalised ones and promoting national and regional



integration. The DBCIC makes an active effort to document and record the lesser known practices of these people ranging from the material culture of the people of this region to the history, religion and indigenous knowledge systems.

### Knowledge Sharing

Besides being a museum, DBCIC is a place where active research, animation programmes in the form of workshops, courses, seminars and conferences are held. It is a place of rich heritage of traditional knowledge. Its mission is to develop the vast store of traditional knowledge in the area of indigenous medicine, folklore, music, arts and architecture, values hidden in proverbs, stories, mythologies, sacrifices, celebrations, unwritten wisdom, traditional leadership forms etc. in north-east India.

The DBCIC, as a museum is multi-dimensional in its approach. The guide book to the institution states the objectives of study and research of cultures and related themes through workshops, courses, seminars and symposia, language institute, publications on cultures of the north-east, preparation of documentaries on dances, festivals, historical aspects, places of interest from the point of view of indigenous cultures. With sixteen galleries displaying the variegated culture of the entire north-east, the

museum has, at its disposal the necessary technology to assist it in its mission of the preservation of culture.

North-east Indian rural everyday life is characterised by activities like agriculture, weaving, hunting and fishing and the ritual (or everyday) practice of brewing rice beer. The indigenous people have developed practical yet serviceable implements to carry out these activities. But with the advent of the modern era, many of these implements have been replaced with new and improved models. While it is in the interest of the people to move with the times, yet in the remote interiors of the region, one can still find the use of these tools an everyday affair. The museum affords the visitor an experience of this age old ways of life. Several galleries have been dedicated to this aspect of the culture of these people.

Oral tradition forms the core value of the inhabitants of the seven sister states. Each tribe has its own belief and knowledge systems that influence their perspectives and in turn, their entire life. For example, in Nagaland, the *Morung* or *Ariju* (bachelors' dormitory) is "one of the oldest and strongest means of social control and serves as an agent of community protection since this institution trains and disciplines the youth. This institution also serves society's

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need for social security and promotes culture. It also serves as a training centre for master craftsmanship in handloom, handicraft, pottery, masonry etc, and all other agricultural and trade activities. JP Mills had described the *Ariju* as a 'Public School' (as also a boys' club) and indeed in modern terms that is exactly what it is and because from the *Ariju*, the process of socialisation for an Ao man begins. (From *Ariju: The Traditional Seat of Learning in Ao Society* by Monalisa Changkija). The DBCIC displays pictures of this social institution, thereby giving the lay visitor an experience of Ao Naga value systems.

The north-east consists of people belonging to different communities. There are different tribes of people inhabiting this region; their busts and physical features have been described and displayed through clay modelled busts. The physiological characteristics of these different people are elucidated upon and as mentioned earlier, illustrated through the use of the clay works.

Another important aspect of tribal life in this region is the weaving culture that is prevalent. For example, among the *Adi* tribe of Arunachal Pradesh and the *Lushai* tribe of Mizoram, an unmarried girl's bride price is traditionally

determined by her proficiency in weaving. An entire gallery is dedicated to this significant aspect of tribal life, where the pattern and design in the woven cloth assumes the individuality of a particular tribe. "Each tribe has its own particular costume and ornaments. Although in many aspects the manner of wearing these may be similar yet the type of materials used and the designs vary considerably. These costumes and ornaments mark the identity of each tribe and they are easily noticeable. Although traditional costume and ornaments are worn by people only in rural areas, during dances and festivals they are also used by the people in the urban areas."

If dress and weaving are integral to the social life of the tribal, music forms the core of his/her culture. No ritual, ceremony or festival is complete without music and the accompanying chants or dance forms. As unique as the woven cloth is to a tribe, so is its musical instrument. Some tribes have folk stories attached to the origin of a particular musical instrument; others are sacred in origin and use. For example, the Garo *naqqara* is taken out ceremoniously and the opening beats herald the start of the *Wangala* Dance or the Hundred Drums Festival of the Garos of Meghalaya. The musical instruments gallery of the DBCIC affords the visitor, a

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close up view and experience of the musical heritage of the north-easterners. An audio port allows one to listen to the music of any tribe of this region.

As has been seen therefore, the DBCIC seeks to preserve and promote whatever is good and beautiful in culture. In its

vision and its mission it has become the forerunner of an idea which is so essential in our violence-ripped society, the design of which is underlined by the belief that if all cultures are understood well, they can motivate our efforts to build a peaceful, developed and progressive society.



# Meghalaya's Underground Treasures

*B.D. Kharpran Daly*

Millions of years ago, a little coral island rose from a tropical ocean swarming with sharks and teeming with shellfish and crustaceans which thrived in the warm ocean waters. Its birth was not a smooth and easy process, but rather a succession of dramatic events, where parts of the land were uplifted only to sink before rising above the sea again.

Plankton and algae and other life-like shellfish and snails, which thrived in that primeval warm shallow sea, used the calcium carbonate brought down by the rivers to build their shells and when they died, those shells or skeletal remains were deposited on the sea bed. Limestone was therefore deposited on whatever part of the coral island that was underwater, which was actually all along its southern edge, while rivers from the inland brought sand to the coast, building up sandstones and burying mangrove forests destined to become coal.

Limestone was also deposited by the precipitation of calcium carbonate by the lime-bearing water from rivers due to the heating and evaporation of the sea water. Over time, up to five

beds of limestone accumulated, which alternated with sandstone. At places these, limestone and sandstone beds laterally pass into each other because of the earth's forces at work, in lifting and sinking some sections of that little coral island, which is today the tiny state of Meghalaya.

The Khasis have their own mythological discourses to account for the extensive formations. They believe that the caverns are the bones of the giant U Ramhah, who died alone and unattended in the hills. When he was found, the story goes, the community came in numbers to perform rites, but his body was too large to be cremated. So they waited for his flesh to rot, so that they could gather his bones. The people piled the bones on the hillside, while they made an urn large enough to contain them. Meanwhile, there blew a hurricane so wild, it carried away the bleached bones of U Ramhah and scattered them all over the southern borders of the Khasi hills, where they remain to this day as limestone caverns.

The geology of Meghalaya would confirm the development of sedimentary rocks especially

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limestone all along the southern and south-eastern borders of Meghalaya and the Mikir Hills in an almost 300 kilometres long stretch. These are the areas which harbour Meghalaya's sub-terranean treasures of caves and caverns, formed by the ideal conditions of high grade limestone, the world's highest precipitation of rainfall, a hot and humid climate and elevation. Nature has, through centuries of infinite patience, sculptured a wonderland of exotic and mysterious caves.

Steeped in legends and myths, caves hold a tremendous appeal for men – whether he is a prehistoric cave-dweller or a modern scientist armed with state of the art investigative technology. They constitute an integral part of the history of the Greek and Roman civilizations, and find constant mention in folklore and mythology as being abodes of gods like Zeus, Pan, Dionysius and Pluto. For many, caves are invested with their own sense of mystery and mysticism but in Meghalaya, they hold their own special place in the folklore of the people. *Krem Marai*, on the eastern side of the Shillong Peak, is associated with the *Ka Pah Syntiew* (one who is lured, seduced by flowers), the fabled daughter of the *Lei Shillong* or the Shillong deity regarded as chief of the gods and ancestress of the

clan of the Syiem of Myllem and Khyrim. The *Syndai* Caves in the Jaintia Hills are believed to have been used as hideouts by the Jaintia Rajas in times of war, and Tetengkol in South Garo Hills is believed by the local inhabitants, to be the abode of dwarfs with inverted feet. More interesting is the legend of an army marching through the dark underground corridors of Krem Lymput, right up to China. Historically, the cave *Kut Sutiang* located in the midst of a forest of towers, is known as Kiang Nongbah's last resort in his fight against the British, when the people rose in open revolt against the house tax that was imposed upon them. Finally, of course, there are the *Krem Tiro* caves at *Niangdai* and *Mairang*, which were used by the great Khasi warrior, *Tiro Sing Syiem*, as places to sustain his guerilla warfare against the British.

Caves however, are much more than an adventurer's romance, for "they constitute a valuable scientific resource and are regarded as natural museums in which evidence of past climate, past geomorphic processes, past vegetation, past animals and past people will be found by those who are persistent and know how to read the pages of earth history displayed for them."<sup>1</sup> With the mystery, awe and dread that surround them,

<sup>1</sup> Gillieson, David: *Caves: Processes, Development, Management*. Blackwell Publishers (1996)

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some of the more obvious caves of Meghalaya have been entered into for a limited distance by the local people, but vast portions have never been fully explored.

There are references to the caves in notes and surveys from the early 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards by several British officers. Though sporadic, these jottings hint significantly at the world below. It was not until 1922 that there was a systematic exploration of a cave at Dobhakol (Siju). Kemp and Chopra of the Indian Museum, Calcutta, undertook a three week exploration of the cave. Water courses were negotiated with petrol lamps, the sumps were attempted with electric torches and about 1,200 metres of passage was mapped. Samples of rock were collected, fish were caught and bugs collected. It still remains the most researched cave in India. It was only in 1992 that the true caving potential of the region was discovered, when the Meghalaya Adventurers' Association tentatively delved into the realms of the subterranean. This was followed by a foray by four British cavers led by Simon Brooks, following up on information provided by noted Indian Caver, Daniel Gebauer. Since then, cavers from Europe, USA and India have been collaborating on the 'Abode of the Clouds Project' to fully bring to light the extent of Meghalaya's caves.



By far, the Jaintia Hills district, which has a greater depth of limestone deposit, has the largest concentration of caves – both horizontal and vertical, and more extensive than the caves in the other districts of the state. It is therefore not surprising that all the longest and deepest caves in the country are located in this district.

### ***Krem Liat Prah-Um Im-Labit System***

This is currently India's longest cave at 30,957 metres in length. It is a vast system comprising several sections like *Krem Liat Prah*, Laumann's Pot, Snowman's Pot, *Krem Um Im 1 to 8*, Knee Wrecker Pot 2, *Krem Labit (Khaidong)*, *Krem Chune*, *Krem Labit (Moolesngi)* and *Krem Rubong*.

The main *Krem Liat Prah* sloping entrance through a roof

collapse, leads to an ancient trunk passage of impressive size named Aircraft Hangar, which has a meandering stream with huge mud banks. There are many inlet stream ways. This cave is notable for its mud floored tunnels – resembling lengthy, roofed over brown deserts. The most notable feature of the system is its enormous fossil passage.

### **Kotsati - Umlawan Cave System**

The entrance of *Krem Kotsati*, usually submerged during the monsoons, is located in *Lumshnong* village. It is a network of many caves like *Krem Kotsati*, *Krem Umtiyongai*, *Krem Umsynrang*, *Liehwait*, *Krem Wahjajew*, *Krem Lalit*, *Synrang Thloo*, *Krem ‘Washing Place Inlet,’ Krem Umshor*, *Put Lyer*, *Garage Pot*, *Thloong Kharasniang* and the thirteen other entrances of *Krem Umlawan*.

It is a river cave of asymmetric dendritic pattern and its main feature is the Virgin River, which is characterised by a long series of beautiful rim-stone pools. The Virgin River Passage is itself over 5000 metres in length. At one end, the cave eventually opens out into the Crystal Maze, described by A.R. Jarratt as “a smallish, intricate labyrinthine passage...all fantastically decorated with layers of gypsum crystals, stalactites and

stalagmites.” Grey limestone walls are flecked with crystals of black gypsum and orange stal and patches of red sandstone ceiling add to the multi-coloured effect. This cave system is a maze of passages and with 21,530 metres of surveyed passage it is India’s second longest. It is also India’s second deepest cave with 218 metres depth.

In order to give a broader perspective of the caves of Meghalaya, here is a brief description of a couple of caves in the Khasi Hills and Garo Hills respectively.

### **Khasi Hills: Krem Mawkhyrdop or Krem Mawmluh**

An easy cave for a novice caver but would still provide the thrills and excitement and a dash of adrenaline pumping into the heart of a first timer. The main entrance of the cave is located on the western flank of *Lum Lawbah* in the hamlet of *Mawmluh*, just about 2 kilometres from Cherrapunjee or *Sohra*. The stream waters enter the sink, as also the effluents coming out of the Mawmluh Cherra Cements Limited, making the main sink entrance a deadly trap of black quicksand. The best option to enter the cave would be through a high level bypass entrance which runs parallel to the main passage. The cave takes in a lot of water during the monsoons,

**An easy cave for a novice caver but would still provide the thrills and excitement and a dash of adrenaline pumping into the heart of a first timer.**

flooding some of the passages up to the ceiling. It is the Khasi Hills' longest cave system at 7,194 metres.

### **Garó Hills: *Tetengkol Balwakol***

The cave is situated four kilometres north of Nengkhong village on the banks of the *Chibe Nala*. The two adjacent 1 metres diameter circular entrances lead to 5,681 metres of dendritic river cave which also contains a maze of stooping to walking size passages. The small entrances really belie the size of the cave. The main feature of the cave, besides the stream-ways and the sandy tube passages is, 'The Planetarium,' an impressive chamber (30 m wide and 20 m high, up to 60 m long).

Significantly, Meghalaya has one of the longest sandstone caves known anywhere in the world. Krem Maw Tynhiang situated in Lum Iawpaw, Nongnah, West Khasi Hills, has not been fully explored, but with 3.16 kilometre of surveyed passage, it is already one of the world's top sandstone caves. The cave developed in soft calcareous sandstone, could possibly interlink with a number of other caves in the area. Though not proven yet, the potential for doubling the length of the cave is highly likely.

These dark, mysterious worlds, tucked away in inaccessible

bowels of the earth, hold on to their secrets...a complete world of an almost parallel nature. They offer not just thrills and excitement to the cave explorer but, as natural museums, they are actually vast scientific resource, opening up their doors to the archaeologist, hydrologist, paleontologist, bio-speleologist, geologist and climatologist. They are the dark, forbidding, underground treasures of Meghalaya.

Caves are also home to troglobitic animals that live entirely in the dark recesses of caves, totally devoid of sunlight. They are characterised by improved senses of smell, taste and vibration detection and, on the other hand, by loss of anatomical features such as functioning eyes and pigmentation. The study of such cave fauna gives us vital clues in piecing together links in evolution and bio-geography. Such unique and endemic forms of cave life have already been revealed in some of the caves in Jaintia Hills.

Climatologists would revel in the study of the speleothems, as they can reveal the history of past climate. Such studies are already being undertaken in some of Meghalaya's caves. An interesting disclosure of this study in *Krem Mawkhyrdop* (Krem Mawmluh) has pointed to a drought in Cherrapunjee in the past.

**Climatologists would revel in the study of the speleothems, as they can reveal the history of past climate. Such studies are already being undertaken in some of Meghalaya's caves.**



These fragile sub-terranean passages are today, the last frontiers on planet earth for

any exploration. The state of Meghalaya is blessed with these natural and archaeological heritage assets, which number almost twelve hundred, with more and more being discovered year after year. Any damage done to these magnificent underground chambers is irreversible. It would be unfortunate to destroy these hidden and secret worlds which have been carved by nature. We are custodians of nature's gifts for future generations. These vulnerable assets need our understanding, acknowledgement and commitment to conserve them for posterity.

# Tripura: A Composite Culture

*Saroj Chaudhury*

A look into the map of north-east India reveals a small “lamb’s head” peeping into Bangladesh on its south-east. That is the state of Tripura, slightly bigger than Sikkim and smallest among the seven sisters (the seven states, Arunachal, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura) of the north-east, between 22.56 and 24.32 North latitudes and between 91.10 and 92.21 East longitudes. The present size and shape of the state is a truncated one as a result of the partition of India. Originally, the princely state of Tripura had its boundary extended on all three sides in the lands of erstwhile East Pakistan. It consisted of hilly tracts and plains. Almost the whole of the plain area had been cut off during the partition. The present day state of Tripura is the area previously known as ‘Hill Tripurah’. Now, the state is surrounded on all sides by foreign territory, except a narrow tract of land in the east connecting it with Assam and Mizoram. The border with Mizoram is virtually inaccessible, made so by the intercepting hill ranges. The National Highway 44 is Tripura’s link with rest of the country.

The last ruler of Tripurah in pre-independent times, Maharaja Bir

Bikram Kishore Manikya (1923-47) had expressed the intention of acceding to the Indian Union, prior to his death months before independence. Accordingly, the region queen signed the Instrument of Accession. The administration of the state was taken over by the Government of India in October 1949. Through the stages of part-C state and Union Territory, Tripura earned the status of a state in January 1972. In a sense, Tripura is probably among the worst affected states due to the partition of India. The line of partition had been meticulously drawn to cut off all communication lines of this state with the greater part of the country. With each socio-political upheaval in the adjoining country, Tripura has also had to face the surge of distressed people from across the border.

Tripura is filled with lush green cane and bamboo groves, dark primeval forests, transparent lakes and dancing streamlets. Plains and hills come almost alternatively. Seven long ranges run across the land at regular intervals. The hills are modest, never raising their heads over a thousand odd metres. The rivers are neither broad nor deep

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enough to inspire awe or allow heavy navigation. It is a stretch of undulated strips with fertile valleys.

Our knowledge about the earliest human settlements in this region is extremely limited. It is presumed that communities migrated from north-east, south east and west. The earliest settlers are believed to belong to the same origin as the Kacharia. Later, other ethnic groups also settled. The then royal family maintained a close contact with Bengal, fostering education, trade and commerce. As a result, from the ancient times, the population of Tripura shows a chequered pattern of variety. There are as many as nineteen tribes, many having their own language and cultural tradition, while the dominant language and tradition is that of the Tripuris. The language is known as *Kokborok*. It belongs to the 'Bodo' branch of the Tibeto-Burmese family of language. Eight communities, out of the nineteen original inhabitants of Tripura, speak this language or some variety of it. Besides, some other indigenous people of the state and adjacent areas also use *Kokborok* as their language for communication. *Kokborok* is a state language of Tripura, the other being Bengali.

Tripura has great antiquity, ruled by kings for thousands of years who claimed their descent

from the then king Yayanti of the 'lunar dynasty'. There are references in the Mahabharata. Yet, neither the precise location of its first establishment nor the source of its name can be identified beyond all doubt. The kingdom might have expanded, contrasted or even shifted in these ancient days, when migration to better lands and livelihoods was a part of life. The name also might have changed from *Kiratadesha* or *Tribog*; the name Tripura can be related to the tyrannical king Tripur, killed by the curse of Lord Shiva, or it might have come down from the name of the guardian goddess of the state-Tripuraswari, or even it could be from the native expression 'Tripura' meaning confluence of rivers.

## Composite Culture

The cultural heritage of the state is significant. On the one hand, the ancient ethnic groups inherited and developed their cultural identity, on the other, the large number of Bengalis and Manipuris settled on the land, practiced their own. The most interesting feature of the cultural scenario of the state is that we find a unique cultural confluence. The 'mixed cultural matrix' or the composite culture, as it is called, is a blend of elements from different cultures, willingly accepted. The mixed culture in Tripura is not transgression on one another's

**The population of Tripura shows a chequered pattern of variety. There are as many as nineteen tribes, many having their own language and cultural tradition, while the dominant language and tradition is that of the Tripuris.**



cultural domain. It is respectful acceptance of each other's cultural wealth. This spirit of acceptance can be found in the celebration of festivals. Local gods co-exist with god of the Brahmanical order; gods having names from Hindu pantheons are worshipped with local rituals. In language, there are a large number of bilinguals; in everyday lifestyle and social interactions the same spirit of confluence is evident. The erstwhile kings were dedicated patrons of Indian tradition and art. At the same time, they were not unaware of the local traditions.

## Fine Arts and Crafts

History is not even half as attentive in recording artistic creations as it is in documenting feats of fights, but fine arts and crafts are the most important documents of human civilisation and culture. Fine arts have been a way of life with the people of Tripura. The earliest reference to a master artist is found in the 'Rajmala' (the royal annals of the state), in the story of the then king Trilocima, who selected his queen on her outstanding weaving feat of working out the 'fly-wing-design' on a 'risa' (breast cloth). There are references to the then queen of *Khishong* Fa and queen *Chandratara* who were themselves expert artists in weaving and great patrons of the art. This cultural heritage still

continues in the looms of Tripuri homes. The Manipuri and other communities also had their own distinctive designs and patterns: the Bengali weavers practiced their skill in dhotis and sarees and also produced exquisite needle-work on wrappers (Kanthas). Under Government incentives, this traditional local art is now famous all over India as Tripura handloom products.

As among other ancient ethnic groups in the north-east, 'Jhum' or shifting cultivation was the usual practice among the original inhabitants of the states. This centre of the life pattern, as the source of aesthetic activities, consists of songs, music, dance and oral literature. In the *Jhum*-centric life, bamboo held a very important position in making houses and 'Gyrings' (watch huts on stilts), and in preparing and carrying of food and water. It became the symbol of the deity. Ornamentation on these sacred bamboo pieces through intricate lines and designs and aesthetic touches in the making of household wares from bamboo and cane have developed into today's famous Tripura-bamboo and cane handicrafts. Added to this expertise is the wood carving skill of the plainspeople.

## Art

The erstwhile kings were great patrons of art. Many of them were themselves talented

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artists. The earliest reference to paintings is found in early 19<sup>th</sup> century of one Alangir Karigar, a painter of royal portraits in Mughal miniature school. The then King Birchandra Manikya and the princes, Samarendra Chandra and Mahendra Chandra were outstanding painters. King Birendra Kishore was an artist par excellence. Through royal patronage and close ties of the royal family, links were established with Government Art College of Calcutta and with Shantiniketan. The practice of painting also gained impetus. A number of remarkable artists in this line emerged from different communities. Painting became so much a part of lifestyle that a full-scale art college of today was only a matter of time. Names like those of late Dharendra Krishna Deb Barman and Kumari Kamalprava Devi, Suresh Deb Barman, Shyamacharan Chakrabarti, Sailesh Deb Barman, Ramendranath Chakrabarti, in the past and the names of late Bipul Kanti Saha, late Sumangal Sen, late Shakti Halder, Shri Bimal Kar, Shri Chimmey Ray and others in recent times, speak of the high standard of this tradition in Tripura.

## **Music**

Tripura has an equally glorious cultural heritage of music. The then royal court patronised classical music hosting a galaxy

of artistes like Quasem Ali Khan, Ustad Kulandar Bux, Ustad Kaidar Khan, Ustad Nissar Hussain, Tanraj Jadu Bhatta, Pandit Kshetramohan Bose and others. The tradition produced outstanding artistes like Anil Krishna Deo Barman. This tradition of Indian classical music has continued. Side by side, Tripura provided a congenial ground for practice and development of plain-land folk musical forms like Jari, Sari, Baul, Kirtan, Bhatiali and others. There is also the rich and varied store of folk songs of the Tripuris and other communities. That folk song was not a casual affair, but a matter of regular tradition in Tripura hills, is indicated by the fact that for accompaniment with these songs, Tripura has its own distinctive instruments like the *Sumi* (the mysterious Tipperah flute), *khan* and *chongpreng*. In the practice of music, Tripura once again exhibits its confluence character, which can be best seen in Kumar Sachin Dev Barman – S. D. Barman to the rest of India.

## **Dance Forms**

The composite culture of Tripura is manifest in its repertoire of dances. Apart from Manipuri, the Indian classical dance forms like Kathak, Kathakali, Odissi or Bharatnatyam are learnt and practiced in institutional courses. Manipuri, although a classical

form, has been made popular by the Manipuri community settled in Tripura. The influence of Rabindranath Tagore has added a new dance form in the land. Drawing much from the Manipuri form, it is known as 'Rabindra Nritya', attuned to Tagore songs and Tagore's dance dramas. Distinctive styles among the Bengali community are comparatively fewer. Dhamail and Gajan are two popular forms. On the other hand, the tribal society of Tripura is immeasurably rich in its dance forms. Each community has more than one dance, of which some have become famous even in all over India: Kine Jum, Garia and Mamita dance of the Tripuris, Hejagiri of the Reangs, *Biju* of the Chakmas and Charelam of the Mises of Tripuris. A form of martial dance can be traced in the *Darlan* dance form of the *Kukis* of Tripuris.

## Dramatic Arts

Although not as prominent as Manipur, Tripura also has a developed tradition of dramatic arts. Recorded history of dramatic performance can be traced back only from the beginning of the last century. Starting from within the palace walls, stage performance became popular in all walks of life. Participation was free and spontaneous. This might be another beneficial result of Rabindranath's close

association with the state. At the outset, the performance were mostly Bengali, including Rabindranath's plays, but love for this performing art was no less among other communities. Popular knowledge speaks of a very popular 'yatra' (open air theatrical performance) form among the Janatias. Therefore, dramatic performance soon became a widespread pursuit among all sections of the people, with serious preparations. From the sixties of the last century, Tripura with its group theatres, assimilated the spirit of people's theatre and of the drama movement. Today, Tripura has a number of outstanding performing groups with remarkably capable individuals in all the communities. Powerful plays are being written in various languages.

## Literature

Being the court language, writing in Bengali flourished in Tripura from early sixteenth century. The Rajmala is considered as the oldest historical writing in Bengali. Earlier writings in poetry related to heroic feasts of the kings. From the middle of the nineteenth century, the advent of the 'modern age' may be marked. The then king Birchandra was a great patron of art and literature, and himself a poet of great merit. Anangamebini Devi was a poet of exquisite sensibility. Most

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princes and princesses followed literary pursuits in great earnest and many of them were literary artists of high order. Mahim Chandra Deb Barma, Kailash Chandra Sinha Chandradey Vidyavinede and others held very important positions in the history of early Bengali literature of Tripura. The middle of the nineteenth century was also the period of beginning of relationship of the royal family with Rabindranath Tagore. The association of Rabindranath Tagore added new vigour to the literary practice in the state. Literature flourished in different forms and a corpus of Bengali literature in Tripura was formed, which still continues. Quite a number of present day writers have earned recognition beyond the state.

Literature appeared in written form towards the middle of the last century, but the late beginning was compensated by a rapid growth into maturity. It was largely because of the fact that the Kokborok literature has its foundation in the rich and varied ground of oral literature. A keen sense of social responsibility and political consciousness led to the establishment of the Jana Siksha Samiti. The Samiti spread new consciousness, which found expression in literature through the organs inspired by the Samiti. Right from the beginning, Kokborok

literature has flowered in novels, plays and poems. At present, the Kokborok Sahitya Akademi has been providing necessary support to the literature. A good number of Kokborok writers are known in India through translation of their works.

## Rock Sculpture

Another cultural heritage that Tripura takes pride in is rock sculpture. The ancient rock sculptures of huge Avalekiteswar, Surya, Ganapati and Shiva in North (Unakoti) and South (Pilak and Devtamura) speak of an illustrious artistic past of the state. Along with its mixed heritage, the local and ethnic features give the works a definite identity. From the variety in rock sculpture, it appears that Buddhism and Brahmanical Dshaiva, Shakta, Ganapatya as well as Vaishnava cult held their sway on this land without much critical conflict. Even if the different faiths prevailed in different periods, there is hardly any indication of the successor taking to deliberate destruction of the predecessor. The same spirit of blending can be felt behind the variety of architecture.

In the observation of a scholar: “What is unique in Tripura is that here one finds elements of culture of different sets of people, each unique in its own

**The association of Rabindranath Tagore added new vigour to the literary practice in the state. Literature flourished in different forms and a corpus of Bengali literature in Tripura was formed, which still continues.**

way and mingled together. In the process, a composite culture embraces the different strands of faith.” In the tradition of unity in diversity, Tripura stands as India in microcosm.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> But for help from guiding works, it is almost impossible to deal with the different aspects of Tripura, so varied and so very unique in character. The author gratefully acknowledges his debt to the works of Dr. S. N. Guhathakurta, Dr. Ratna Das, Dr J. Ganchandhuri, Dr. Padmini Chakrabarti, Shri Cjiramjeev Kaviraj, Shri Suren Debbarmann, Shri Kunud Kundu Chaudhuri, Shri Priyabrats Bhattacharyya, Shri Bikash Chaudhuri and others. Publications of different Government Departments and of Tripura State Kala Academy also have been consulted.



# Annexure I

## *Selected Excerpts on the North-East from the 11<sup>th</sup> Five Year Plan Volume I: Inclusive Growth, Chapter 7*

### **Paragraph 7.2 North-Eastern Region**

**Para 7.2.1.** The North-Eastern Region (NER) of the country forms an area of low per capita income and major growth requirements. Growth in social infrastructure through national programmes must be complemented by development of physical and economic infrastructure. In this context, the development efforts of the states have to be supplemented in order to minimise certain distinct geo-physical and historical constraints.

### **Basic Features of the North-Eastern Region**

**Para 7.2.2.** The process of development had been slow in the NER for many reasons. Traditional system of self-governance and social customs of livelihood in NER remained virtually untouched during the British rule. The creation of a rail network for linking tea growing areas for commercial interests was the only major economic activity taken up in the region during this period. The partition of the country in 1947 further isolated the region. This has also disturbed the socio-economic

equations in many parts of the region resulting in the demand for autonomy by the relatively more backward areas. The late participation in planned development process by some of the north-eastern states (for example, Nagaland and Sikkim) has also deprived the region from the benefit of the strategies adopted for infrastructure improvement and creation of basic minimum services for some years after independence. While development efforts over the years have made some impact (as reflected in some of the HDIs which are comparable with the rest of the country), the region is deficit in physical infrastructure which has a multiplier effect on economic development. The basic development indicators of NER are provided in Annexure 7.2.1.

### **NER as a Special Category for Development Efforts**

**Para 7.2.3.** Recognising the special requirements of the region and the need for significant levels of government investment, the north-eastern states have been categorised as Special Category States and Central Plan assistance to these states is provided on liberal terms.

**Table 7.2.1****Central Assistance as Percentage of GSDP during the Tenth Plan**

S. No	Category	2002-03	2003-04	2004-05	2005-06	2006-07
1.	North Eastern States	9.07	9.18	10.67	10.55	10.60
2.	Special Category States	9.30	10.14	10.44	10.03	9.65
3.	Non-Special Category States	2.43	2.30	2.26	2.05	1.94
4.	All India	2.83	2.75	2.72	2.49	2.35

**Special Initiatives**

**Para 7.2.7.** The Ministry of Development of North-Eastern Region (DoNER) was set up in 2001 to coordinate and give impetus to the Centre's development efforts pertaining to socio-economic development of the region. NLCPR, which was initially handled by the Planning Commission, was transferred to DoNER after its creation. DoNER is responsible for coordinating the planning, execution and monitoring of the developmental schemes and projects in NER, NEC, NEDFI, North-Eastern Regional Agricultural Marketing Corporation Limited, NEHHDC, and so on. While DoNER is to coordinate with various Ministries/Departments primarily concerned with development and welfare activities in NER, the respective Ministries/Departments are responsible in respect of subjects allocated to them.

**Special Packages for NER**

**Para 7.2.9.** The Central Government has also been announcing special packages for

socio-economic development of the NER from time to time. Priority funding (both in the Central Plan and State Plan) are being arranged from time to time for expeditious implementation of these packages.

**North-Eastern Council (NEC)**

**Para 7.2.10.** The NEC was established under the NEC Act, 1971 to act as an advisory body in respect of socio-economic development and balanced development of the seven states of the NER. In 2002, Sikkim was included by an amendment and the Council has been designated the Regional Planning Body. The functions of NEC are to discuss matters of common interest in the field of economic and social planning of the region and advise the governments (Central and State) as to the action to be taken on such matters, formulate regional plans and recommend the manner in which the regional plan may be implemented. NEC is also to monitor the progress of project implementation and recommend to the Central Government the quantum of

financial assistance to be given to the states. However, the absence of a well coordinated regional Plan is being felt constantly.

**Para 7.2.12.** The major investments had been in transport and communication followed by the water and power sector. Investments include construction of roads, upgradation/improvement of airports, survey and investigation of hydroelectric power projects, funding support for hydro and gas based power projects, transmission lines and transformation projects, and so on. Schemes taken up under the health sector are development of technical manpower (MBBS, postgraduate courses, para-medical and other specialists/super specialists' courses), improvement of health infrastructure/health centres, and so on. Important regional institutes funded by the NEC are the North East Police Academy (NEPA); Regional Institute of Medical Sciences (RIMS), Imphal; Regional Institute of Para-medical and Nursing (RIPAN), Aizawl; Regional College of Nursing, Guwahati; Regional Dental College (RDC), Guwahati; LGBRIMH, Tezpur; and Regional Institute of Pharmaceutical Science and Technology, Agartala. Based on the suggestion made by the Planning Commission, RIMS, Imphal; LGB Regional Institute of Mental Health (LGBRIMH),

Tezpur; and RIPAN, Aizawl have been transferred to the Health Ministry and NEPA has been transferred to the Ministry of Home Affairs from the Annual Plan 2007–08.

## **Total Flow of Plan Investment Resources in the Tenth Plan**

**Para 7.2.15.** It is often criticised that despite these huge investments, the impact is not visible. Major projects in the transport and communication, irrigation and also in the power sectors are incomplete due to poor planning and execution. The need for a coordinated approach to investment is evident. Although it would be difficult to come to a definite conclusion on the impact of the investments made so far without any evaluation study, it is prudent to intensify closer monitoring and evaluation of outcomes from investment made as a self-improvement mechanism. It would be necessary to evaluate some of the programmes under DoNER (NEC, NLCPR).

## **Financial Institutions and Credit Availability**

**Para 7.2.21.** Availability of credit is one of the critical weaknesses in the development of economic activity. Various indicators for NER show that despite improvement in banking facilities in the last



five years, the level of financial outreach is low. Credit to Net State Domestic Product (NSDP) ratio of all the States ranging from 9 in Nagaland to 41 in Meghalaya, is lower than the national average of 62. The ratio of current and savings accounts of scheduled commercial banks per 100 adult population as on 31 March, 2005, ranged from 19.5 in Manipur to 40.9 in Meghalaya, with a regional average of 37.3, distinctly lower than the national average of 59.3 (Table 7.2.3).

**Para 7.2.22.** The main impediments for banking and financial development are topography of the region, sparse population settlements, infrastructural bottlenecks, smaller size of the market, lack of

entrepreneurship, law and order conditions in some parts of NER, land tenure system especially in hilly areas, development strategy based on grants rather than loans, low network of branches, lack of simple, customised and flexible financial products to suit the needs of the local population, poor loan recovery experience, lack of awareness of banking services and inadequate payment systems.

### Task Force on Connectivity on Promotion of Trade and Investment in NER

**Para 7.2.25.** The Planning Commission constituted a Task Force on Connectivity and Promotion of Trade and Investment in NER. The main

**Table 7.2.3**  
**Indicators of Banking Development in the North East**

S. No.	States	APPBO		CD Ratio		Current and Savings Accounts per 100 adult		Credit Accounts per 100 Adult population		Per Capita Deposit (in Rs) Population		Per Capita Credit (in Rs)		Credit to NSDP Ratio
		2001	2005	2001	2005	2001	2005	2001	2005	2001	2005	2001	2005	Latest NSDP data
1	Arunachal Pradesh	15813	16211	15	22	45.9	37.8	6.8	6.2	5629	10869	786	2287	1
2	Assam	21008	20960	32	35	39.4	39.1	4.5	5.9	3701	6669	1155	2261	26
3	Manipur	28436	29791	40	42	20.1	19.5	3.2	4.0	1808	4289	717	1713	11
4	Meghalaya	12741	12658	17	44	44.3	40.9	6.9	8.3	7139	13087	1138	5281	41
5	Mizoram	11279	11278	24	48	25.8	29.0	5.4	7.7	4441	8741	1030	4028	NA
6	Nagaland	28009	27990	12	23	22.3	19.7	2.6	3.6	4513	6425	518	1356	9
7	Tripura	17438	17429	22	29	37.0	36.7	12.3	13.6	4905	8200	1015	2240	18
	NE Region	19894	19885	28	35	38.2	37.3	5.4	6.7	4003	7199	1068	2407	NA
	All India	15209	14949	57	66	55.0	59.3	9.7	13.3	9245	16700	4976	10474	62

Source: Report of the Committee on Financial Sector Plan for NER.

recommendations of the Task Force are completion of modified Phase A of SARDP-NE, to take the Trans Arunachal Highway on priority; road links in Manipur; completion of SARDP-NE Phase B selectively based on resources availability in the Eleventh Plan; construction of a bridge at Sadia-Dholaghat over the Brahmaputra River; completion of ongoing railway projects; priority funding for identified projects; construction of three greenfield airports at Pakyong in Sikkim, Itanagar in Arunachal Pradesh and Cheithu in Kohima; modernisation of airports of NER; and harnessing of the maximum potential of inland water as a mode of transport. Endeavour is on to look for possible funding arrangements for the priority projects during the Eleventh Plan.

### **Forest Resources and NER**

**Para 7.2.28.** The forests of NER face unrelenting pressures from increasing population and development resulting in degradation and deforestation. Over-exploitation due to the shortening cycle of shifting cultivation is assumed to be the core driver of this forest degradation and depletion, affecting the bio-diversity of the region.

**Para 7.2.29.** Forest cover statistics of NER reveal some contradictory trends. One set

of data (forest survey) showed a steady reduction in forest cover at an annual rate of 0.15 percent during 1991–2001. However, state level data provides a clear indication of increase in forest cover in almost all the states in 1997-2001. There is a popular perception that the biological potential for carbon finance in the forest sector of NER is substantial. Afforestation and reforestation are being suggested for increasing forest cover in NER. However, this needs huge investment, which the states are unable to meet from their own resources. There is need for incentives to the states for increase in forest cover.

### **Natural Disasters and the NER**

**Para 7.2.30.** The NER is regularly struck by natural disasters in the form of floods and landslides, though other extreme events causing disaster are rare except the disastrous earthquake of 1950. Damages caused by the menace of floods, which assume an alarming proportion, especially in the Brahmaputra and Barak Valleys of Assam, exert considerable strain on the economy, not only of Assam but also other north-eastern states. Other than temporary measures like construction of embankments, long term measures for construction of multi-purpose storage dams for moderating the effect of floods

are lacking. Floods causing disruption in communication network and loss to human life and property have become almost an annual feature in Assam, Tripura, Arunachal Pradesh and other plains areas of north-eastern states. Considering the regular periodicity and gravity of such disasters, appropriate measures need to be adopted and continually refined for management and mitigation of the consequences.

## Primary Sector Development

**Para 7.2.31.** The pattern of agricultural growth has been uneven across the region. The NER is a category of its own kind. The region, which is about 8 percent of the country's total geographical area, produces a very meagre proportion of food grains (1.5%). The enormous potential of the region in agriculture, horticulture, animal husbandry and fisheries is contrasted by the low levels of productivity in the region, which are generally below the national average.

**Para 7.2.32.** To attain sustainable development of agriculture in the region, the availability of the critical inputs like irrigation facilities, including field drainage to prevent water logging, fertilisers, high-yielding variety (HYV) seeds and institutional credit would have to be ensured.

Large irrigation schemes may take their time. Modest but useful unexploited potential for groundwater, river lift and small diversions offer significant immediate possibilities by promoting the use of cost-effective means of irrigation. Agricultural growth can be stepped up by taking measures to improve cropping intensity. The problem of agricultural credit can be overcome by revitalising the cooperative credit structure and availing of NABARD credit.

**Para 7.2.33.** Taking into account the connectivity problem and the perishable nature of the primary produce, in the short run, greater emphasis needs to be given to food processing industries. Cultivation of vegetables, fruits and spices, and commercialisation of agriculture needs to be encouraged by investing in marketing and storage facilities. Institutional reforms are needed to ensure equitable distribution of benefits from groundwater resources. The emphasis should be on agricultural strategy and programmes for income enhancement of the farmer through provision of multiple livelihood opportunities.

## Approach and Strategies for the Eleventh Five Year Plan (2007–12)

**Para 7.2.34.** The NER, though rich in development potential

in terms of human capital and natural resources, lacks in adequate physical infrastructure which is impeding its growth. While considerable progress has been made over the years, certain crucial gaps remain. The primary sector has remained largely stagnant; the secondary sector has been handicapped due to a variety of reasons. The planning exercise has resulted mainly in the expansion of the tertiary sector. Lack of employment opportunities, especially among the educated youth, gets reflected in social disturbances, further slowing down the developmental process.

**Para 7.2.37.** The approach to the Eleventh Plan document has emphasised connectivity as the key area for the development of NER. The Eleventh Plan would have a special thrust on transport infrastructure under the identified programmes and areas identified by the Task Force which would necessitate a concerted and multi-pronged action, including resource mobilisation, which may also comprise VGF. Various road development programmes, including SARDP-NE would be taken up at an accelerated pace. High priority would be accorded for converting the Meter Gauge (MG) network to Broad Gauge (BG) in the region during the Eleventh Five Year Plan period. Efforts will be made to provide

rail link to all State capitals of the NER. Construction of three greenfield airports at Pakyong in Sikkim, Itanagar in Arunachal Pradesh and Cheithu in Kohima would be taken up on priority. Important airports in the NER are proposed to be modernised. In order to harness the potential of inland water as a mode of transport, the River Brahmaputra National Waterway 2, which provides trunk route connectivity to the Region, will be made fully functional.

**Para 7.2.38.** 98% of the borders of the states of NER (excluding Sikkim) are with other countries—Bhutan and China in the north, Myanmar in the east and Bangladesh in the south and west. Economic ties with the neighbouring countries have special significance for the states of the NER due to the long, common border with neighbouring countries and proximity to South-East Asian countries. There is wide scope of generating economic activity through interaction with these countries. A transit route through these countries could also provide larger integration of several states and bring considerable mutual economic advantage. The Look East Policy, hence, is important for bringing these areas out of isolation and gradually developing an economic identity and moving on a higher growth path. Land Customs Stations, which are the

gateways for the transit of goods, services and people between neighbouring countries, need upgradation of infrastructure facilities. There are twelve Land Customs Stations in NER, which need to be strengthened on priority basis.

**Para 7.2.39.** Agriculture, horticulture and related activities can be the engines of economic growth and should be the focus of development planning of the states as well as the Centre. For sustainable development of agriculture during the Eleventh Plan, the thrust would be to ensure availability of the critical inputs (irrigation, facilities of drainage, fertilisers, HYV seeds and institutional credit). Implementation of a region-specific strategy depends critically upon state-level agencies. The Central Government will provide them both technical and financial support.

**7.2.40.** Horticulture, including floriculture, is assuming great significance in NER. Apart from more predictable shortages of planting materials, marketing infrastructure is the weakest link in the value chain. The approach will be to substantially step up efforts in 'field to road' connectivity and also to strengthen the transportation network through dedicated road/rail/air cargo routes. There is need for greater

research and training inputs for converting the horticulture produce to low volume, high value products having long shelf life. During the Eleventh Plan, the 'Technology Mission for Integrated Development of Horticulture' should address these issues. To realise the full potential of horticulture, all four stages between the producer and the consumer—production, procurement/transportation, processing and marketing/distribution—would be strengthened.

**Para 7.2.41.** There is need for conscious effort in banking and financial sector development to ensure unhindered credit flow for supplementing the developmental efforts of the governments in NER. Periodic meetings between industry associations and banks would be of help in understanding the associated problems related to industries in the region. A dialogue with banking and financial institutions is necessary in order to review their existing norms and procedures and adapt suitably to respond to the special land laws and other features prevailing in the NER with a view to augmenting the flow of credit to the region during the Eleventh Plan.

**Para 7.2.42.** There is an urgent need for intensive, effective, focused and time-bound drive for capacity building of state

### **Box 7.2.1**

#### **Critical Parameters for Growth of the North-Eastern Region**

- Two-pronged growth strategy: creation of critical infrastructure and creation of employment opportunities.
- Improvement in the security, law and order and governance.
- Capacity building of implementing machinery (government functionary); technical assistance programmes for capacity building.
- Thrust on major sectors of connectivity (road, rail, air, inland waterways, telecommunication) and power with major step-up in investment in these sectors.
- Thrust on major social infrastructure: Health, Education (upgradation of quality) and Tourism, clearly identifying gaps therein, and Skill Development.
- Emphasis on the primary sector of the economy to substantially step up productivity in foodgrains within a period of five years. Emphasis on agriculture extension services, irrigation.
- Farm-based economic activities: Horticulture, Animal Husbandry, Fisheries, Poultry, and so on.
- Post-harvest management and marketing infrastructure.
- Synergy and dovetailing of programmes/schemes between Central ministries and the State Governments for filling up gaps in infrastructure.
- Building capacity and bringing professionalism in NEC as a Regional Planning Body.
- Active involvement of Autonomous District Councils, Panchayati Raj and local Self Government Institutions, communities and Self-Help Groups in various development welfare schemes.
- Making the region an attractive destination for private sector investment and PPP.
- State-specific approach for the creation of opportunities for employment generation.
- Development of the region linked to the Look East policy of the government and development of relationship with neighbouring countries of the entire region.
- Development of LCS to make international trade attractive through the North-East.
- Systematic approach to infrastructure development (road/rail/power/IWT/airports) in the region. Resources requirement for development is huge. Many of these roads or airports cannot be justified on the basis of economic viability, but these are vital for opening up the region and better integration.
- Maintenance of roads is an important aspect and needs a separate financial arrangement.
- Setting up of an interdisciplinary body for overseeing the planning and timely execution of communication projects undertaken including, inter alia, the absorption capabilities and their augmentation.

machinery wherever states feel that the existing capacity is inadequate. There is need to revisit the 'capacity building' scheme of DoNER. One critical area that requires immediate re-look is the states' capacity to mobilise their own resources. The desired Plan size will depend considerably upon the ability to mobilise resources. There is realisation that it is through effective control on non-plan expenditure and generation of resources in all possible areas that sustainable growth is feasible. Capacity building of personnel in this area would have to be upgraded.

**Para 7.2.43.** The development of human resources needs to be taken up as the highest priority. Upgrading of skills of the workforce, as are relevant to the area, need to be emphasised. Re-designing of the educational map for quality education in the NER should be a priority concern. A holistic planning of education and vocational skills are essential to provide enough opportunities for gainful employment to the youth of the region. This would form an interfaced core point of the Plan.

**Para 7.2.44.** Health and education requires an expanded role for the states of NER for achieving the 'monitorable targets' of the

Eleventh Plan. Access to essential public services such as health, education, clean drinking water and sanitation calls for strong state intervention to ensure delivery of these services. The NRHM has been launched in order to improve the access and availability of quality health care and nutrition. However, due to the difficult terrain conditions, access to these basic services remains a concern for all. During the Eleventh Plan, the delivery mechanism will be strengthened and schematic flexibility of content as well as operationalisation, and partnership with private/non-governmental organisations working in the area will be promoted.

**Para 7.2.45.** Several areas of the region are sparsely inhabited or have special requirements (for example, the islands in the Brahmaputra river) where development programmes, particularly basic services, like education and health have to be provided. State governments would be supported in all the schemes which aim at these.

**7.2.46.** While the above mentioned issues are critical to the growth of the region, effective implementation and monitoring of the above programmes holds the key to any quantum jump in the growth of the region.

## Socio-Economic Indicators of North East and India

S. No.	Indicator	Name of States								All India
		Arunachal	Assam	Manipur	Mizoram	Meghalaya	Nagaland	Sikkim	Tripura	
<b>I.</b>	<b>General</b>									
	1. Area (sq. km)–2001	83743.00	78438.00	22327.00	21081.00	22429.00	16579.00	7096.00	10486.00	3166414
	2. No. of districts–2001	13	23	9	8	7	8	4	4	593
	3. No. of blocks–2001	54	214	34	30	39	52	8	38	5550
	4. No. of towns and Cities–2001	17	125	33	22	16	9	9	23	5161
	5. No. of villages–2001	4065.00	26312.00	2391.00	817.00	6026.00	1317.00	452.00	870.00	638588
<b>II.</b>	<b>Demography</b>									
	6. Total population–2001	1091117	26638407	2388643	891058	2306069	1988636	540493	3191168	1027015247
	(i) Rural population	868429	23248994	1818224	450018	1853457	1635815	480488	2648074	741660293
	(ii) Urban population	222688	3389413	570410	441040	452612	352821	60005.00	543094	285354954
	7. Sex Ratio (female per 1000 male)	893	935	978	935	972	900	875	948	933
	8. SC/ST population									
	(i) SC	6188.00	1825949	60037.00	272.00	11139.00		27165.00	555724	1666635700
	(ii) ST	705158	3308570	741141	839310	1992862	1774026	111405	993426	84326240
	9. Population density (per sq km)	13.11	339.83	97.05	42.15	103.38	236.37	76.22	305.07	324.85
	10. BPL (1999-2000)	33.47	36.09	28.54	33.87	19.47	32.67	36.55	34.44	26.02
	(i) Rural	40.04	40.04	40.04	40.04	40.04	40.04	40.04	40.04	27.01
	(ii) Urban	7.47	7.47	7.47	7.47	7.47	7.47	7.47	7.47	23.62
<b>III.</b>	<b>Health</b>									
	11. Crude Birth/Death Rate									
	(i) Birth Rate	23.3	25.0	14.7	18.8	25.1	16.4	19.9	16.0	23.0
	(ii) Death Rate	5.0	8.7	4.1	5.1	7.5	3.8	5.1	5.7	7.6
	12. TFR	NA	2.9	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
	13. IMR	37	68	13	20	49	18	30	31	58
	14. MMR	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	301
<b>IV.</b>	<b>Education</b>									
	15. Literacy Rate (Total)	54.3	63.3	70.5	88.8	62.6	66.6	68.8	73.2	64.8
	(a) Male	63.8	71.3	80.3	90.7	65.4	71.2	76.0	81.0	75.3
	(b) Female	43.5	54.6	60.5	86.7	59.6	61.5	60.4	64.9	53.7
	16. Gross enrolment ratio (class I-VIII) 6-14 years 2001-02	98.82	99.54	91.65	105.21	94.26	89.72	97.72	89.83	82.35
	17. Drop out ratio (I-VIII) 2001-02	60.02	69.21	37.75	59.89	76.99	53.36	63.41	69.02	54.65



S. No.	Indicator	Name of States								All India
		Arunachal	Assam	Manipur	Mizoram	Meghalaya	Nagaland	Sikkim	Tripura	
<b>V.</b>	<b>Other Eco. Indicators</b>									
	18. No. of districts with access to safe drinking water (2001)	13	23	9	8	7	8	4	4	593
	(a) 100% access	0	1	2	0	1	5	0	0	
	(b) 90% access	0	5	3	0	0	2	0	1	
	(c) 80% access	10	7	2	0	2	1	3	1	
	(d) less than 20%	3	10	1.00	0	4	0	0	2	
	19. Rail density as of 31.03.2003 (Route Km./1000 Sq. Km.)	0.02	32.09	0.06	0.07		0.78		6.14	19.22
	20. Road per 100 Sq. Km. of area (Km.)	21.80	109.04	51.20	23.00	40.70	122.70	26.10	148.40	76.80
	21. CDR (Scheduled Bank) March, 2002									
	(a) As per sanction	15.80	31.70	26.40	26.40	18.30	12.80	16.00	21.50	58.40
	(b) As per utilisation	27.40	70.30	27.30	36.20	24.30	18.10	22.50	21.60	58.40

*Note:* Literacy Rate—percentage of literate to total population aged seven years. Per capita investment ratio is total investment (Public and Private divided by population as per 2001 Census).

*Source:* Census Website India—Demographic figures; Ministry of Health and Family Welfare—Health Sector.

## Annexure II

### *About the Authors*

**Mamang Dai** is an acclaimed journalist, poet and author. Born in Pasighat, Arunachal Pradesh, she is the author of Arunachal Pradesh-The Hidden Land, Mountain Harvest (a book on the Food of Arunachal Pradesh) and The Legends of Pensam (Fiction-Penguin India 2006). She also has a Poetry collection: River Poems (2004). Her work, The Sky Queen and Once upon a Moontime (KATHA) are among the first illustrated publications of the oral literature of the state for young readers. Currently the General Secretary, Arunachal Pradesh Literary Society, Itanagar, and member- North East Writers' Forum, (NEWF), she is also a Member of General Council of the Sahitya Akademi.

**Desmond Kharmawphlang**, a poet and folklorist, teaches folkloristics at the Centre for Cultural and Creative Studies, North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong where he is associate professor. He has a number of publications to his credit and has contributed widely to national and international journals. He is also the director of the North-East Centre for Oral Literature, a project of Sahitya Akademi. Living and working in Shillong,

Meghalaya, he belongs to the Khasi community.

**Tiamerenla Monalisa Changkija** is a well known journalist from the north-east, and the proprietor, publisher and editor of a daily English newspaper, Nagaland Page. She has been the writer of popular columns such as 'The State of Affairs' and 'Of Roses and Thorns'. She is also a poet and writer. Some of her works include 'Monsoon Mourning', 'Weapons of Words Pages of Pain' and 'Of a People Unanswered'. A Fellow of the National Foundation of India (NFI), she is also a member from the north-east in the Planning Commission's National Steering Committee/Working Group on Women's Empowerment for the 11<sup>th</sup> Five Year Plan. Monalisa is also a Member of the Governing Body of the North-East Zonal Cultural Centre, based at Dimapur.

**Margaret Ch. Zama** is a professor at the Department of English, Mizoram University. Apart from academic publications, some of her works include The Dark Beastie: A Study of Golding's Protagonists, The Heart of the Matter (collection of short stories from the north-east),

Where the Sun Rises, numerous translations of Mizo short stories (published by Katha) and Globalisation and the Mizo Story. She is a founding member of the Spastics Society in Mizoram and is also closely involved in work involving the disabilities sector for people with special needs in Mizoram.

**Tayenjam Bijoykumar Singh** is a writer and translator of short stories and poems in English and Manipuri. His works include *Turoi Ngamloiba Wagi Lanban* (an anthology of Manipuri short stories) and *Manipur Trilogy* (an English translation of Ratan Thiyam's Manipuri Plays). He received the Katha Award for Translation in 2005. He is also an Executive Member, North-East Writers' Forum and an Advisor, Chorus Repertory Theatre, Imphal.

**Pradip Acharya** is a well known academic, translator and cultural critic. His translations include *Pages Stained with Blood* (author: Indira Goswami)

and *Ancient Gongs* (Author: Hiren Bhattacharya).

**Fr. Joseph Puthenpurakal** is Director, Don Bosco Centre for Indigenous Cultures (DBCIC), a cultural-anthropological museum and research centre, located in Shillong, Meghalaya.

**B.D. Kharpran Daly** is a speleologist and author of *Caves of Meghalaya*, and is also associated with the Meghalaya Adventurers Association.

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The articles in this book, 'Glimpses from the North-East' solely reflect the personal views and opinions of the authors. NKC shall not bear any responsibility or liability for the authenticity of the views expressed therein. NKC seeks to celebrate and highlight positive aspects of the rich cultural traditions and diversity in the North-Eastern region of India. 'Glimpses from the North-East' is an endeavour in such a direction.





